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ANNE McALLISTER
GINNA GRAY
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Romances

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ANNE McALLISTER

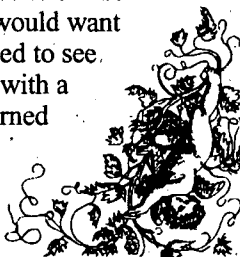
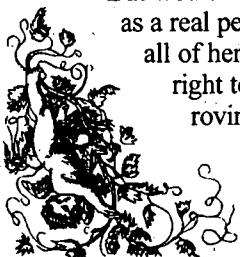


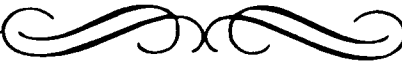
For RITA Award-winning author Anne McAllister, ideas for stories are everywhere. She has found inspiration in a variety of sources—a childhood memory, a phone book, even a fortune cookie. In all her stories, she writes about relationships—how they grow and how they challenge the people who share them. Anne makes her home in the Midwest with her husband and their family. Don't miss her upcoming Silhouette Desire novel, *The Cowboy Crashes a Wedding*, in July 1998.



Body and Soul

Plenty of men “wanted” Susan Rivers...her body at least. But would they ever look beneath the surface to see her as a real person? She wanted a man who would want all of her. But the last person she expected to see right to her very heart was a playboy with a roving eye. Yet Miles Cavanaugh turned out to be so much more....





The bartender was staring at her again. She jerked her attention away, wishing she had never agreed to come to Fidel's tonight.

If there was anything stupider than agreeing to meet *one* man in a bar, it was agreeing to meet *two*.

She had been angling for an interview with the Conquistadors new guard, Houston Adams, for over a week. So when Houston's agent called her at four-thirty to say that Houston would be happy to meet her at Fidel's, she had held her nose with one hand and had written down the address with the other.

Fidel's had one thing to recommend it—its proximity to Chase Whitelaw's apartment. And since she had to break a casual dinner date with him in order to keep this interview with Houston, she found herself agreeing to stay on after and meet Chase for a drink.

The interview with Houston was ending almost as soon as it had begun.

"Sorry," he was saying now, "but the trainer told me to jog tonight. I won't be able to stay. I had that injury last month. I thought I could get the run in earlier, but I didn't have time."

Susan sighed, her gaze skipping over the bartender. "How about tomorrow morning? Somewhere else?" *Anywhere else.*

"My racket club?" Houston gave

her the address. Then he unfolded himself. "I am sorry," he repeated. "You wouldn't like to come along for a quick jog now, would you? Sort of keep me company?"

"No, thanks."

She had fifty minutes to kill before she could expect Chase. And when she looked up, the bartender was mentally undressing her. She stood hurriedly.

"Houston, wait!" Susan shot the bartender a malevolent glare. "I changed my mind," she said sweetly. She was damned if she was going to spend the best part of the next hour being made to feel like a tasty morsel in front of a starving cat. "I've got time for a quick one."

MEN PERSPIRE. Ladies glow. Susan remembered her mother telling her that often during the sweltering days of her Indiana childhood. Well, she thought, she was a regular beacon tonight.

Chase broke into a face-splitting grin the moment he saw her standing in the doorway.

"Houston give you quite a workout?" he teased, standing up from his barstool and giving her a quick peck on the cheek. "What'll you have?"

Susan felt the hair lift on the back of her neck, and she turned her head to meet the bartender's knowing

eyes. "A table across the room," she said flatly.

Once there, Chase dropped into the chair opposite her and ordered each of them a margarita. "Bad day?"

"Terrible day. My mother called this morning. She's having surgery next week. Gall bladder."

"That's rough."

"There's more. She's spending the summer with my sister, Laura, recovering."

"So?"

"So Laura, of course, doesn't have room for Brian. *He's* coming to stay with me."

Chase let out a soundless whistle.

"The brother."

"The very one." She contemplated her drink gloomily. "Lord, Chase, what am I going to do with a fifteen-year-old boy all summer? Especially when I'm going to be homeless myself!"

"What? Why?"

"More bad news," Susan said sourly. "My apartment complex is converting to condos. I have to buy in or be out by the fifteenth."

"Good grief."

"My feelings precisely. I spent the better part of the afternoon looking for apartments. I met three of the dirty-old-men variety of apartment manager. And if that wasn't enough, I came back to the office to listen to some more of Nick Slaughter's sexist comments about my reporting. Then," she went on, building up steam, "I got to jog down the beach with Houston for an hour."

"Well," Chase told her, "I do

have a suggestion. The other half of the duplex I own is for rent."

Susan blinked. "You're my best friend in the whole world. But I don't want to live on the beach. Besides, your duplex is unfurnished, and I don't have a stick to my name."

"True." Chase swirled the pale liquid in his glass contemplatively.

"Then move in with me."

She set her glass down with a thump. "Chase!"

Chase was her best friend. But Susan had really loved only once. Geoff Rivers had been a Himalayan climber, one of the men she interviewed early in her career in Los Angeles. Their marriage was heart-breakingly brief. Just six months after their wedding, Geoff died in a climbing fall.

She had never met the man who could replace him in her heart. Not even Chase.

Chase gave her a rueful smile. "I don't mean that. I mean, no strings. Friends. Nothing more. Besides, I'm going to be gone for several weeks. Doing a story in Ireland. You'd be doing me a favor, actually. Keeping an eye on things for me. What do you say?" He grinned.

He was concerned, and he was offering his help, and— Oh, hell, why not? She had to move somewhere.

For the first time that day, Susan actually wholly and genuinely smiled. "You are truly wonderful. The nicest man I know."

"Of course," Chase agreed blithely. "Want another drink? May-

be with a few more, you'll agree to marry me."

Susan shook her head. "It wouldn't work. You'll know when the right girl comes along." She stood.

"Will you know when it's the right guy?"

Would there ever be another right guy? Susan wondered. The bartender moved into view again, and she turned away instinctively, shying away from the prickles of awareness she felt under his gaze. "I hope so." Then she changed the subject. "Thanks for putting up with my change in plans."

"No problem. I'll pick you up tomorrow after work."

"Sounds great." She glanced at the bartender then, noting the way he was listening with unabashed interest. "I'll be waiting with bells on," she added in her most sultry voice, just for his benefit.

Chase laughed. "You do that. And if you do hear of someone interested in the other apartment, let me know."

"Nick Slaughter," Susan suggested, tongue-in-cheek. She gave Chase a quick peck on the cheek and sailed out the door.

MILES WATCHED her go with mixed emotions.

When she had reappeared earlier, after she had left with the blond giant, he was amazed. He felt a double jolt of surprise and annoyance when she walked right up to Chase Whitelaw at the bar.

Whitelaw lived in the neighborhood, and he tended to drop in every couple of weeks for a beer. Whitelaw was a top-notch investigative reporter. Something in Miles didn't want to think of that black-haired beauty with Chase.

He felt a surge of relief when she eventually got up to leave alone. He tried his best to ignore the kiss she planted on Whitelaw's cheek. But he had a harder time ignoring Chase's promise to pick her up tomorrow after work.

Don't think about her, he told himself. But it was easier said than done until he caught Chase's remark about an apartment for rent. An apartment, he decided, was a damned sight more attainable than the dark-haired woman.

He waited until she left, then caught Chase as he was turning to speak to another of the regulars. "Whitelaw? What's this about an apartment for rent?"

Chase brightened. "The other half of my duplex. I was asking Susan if she wanted to rent it."

Susan Miles filed that away. "Did she?"

"Nope. Do you? It's got two bedrooms. Right on The Strand. Garage in back. Come see it if you want."

Miles wanted. Two bedrooms meant room to paint and a guest room if his black sheep brother Austin ever dropped in. He couldn't have considered it on his bartending salary, but the paintings were bringing in money now.

"Can I see it in the morning?"

"Sure." Chase scribbled the ad-

dress on a napkin. "But not too early," he added, wagging his eyebrows, suggesting exactly why not.

Miles scowled in spite of himself. But he had consciously to remind himself that the dark-haired woman, Susan, wouldn't be spending the night with Chase. If she had been, she would have left with him. Besides, he remembered, she had met a blond guy.

Hell, he thought, and wished he could forget her and her men. Getting an apartment was what really mattered now, not the clamorings of his libido.

SUSAN'S MOTHER had an aphorism for every occasion. The one that had been nagging Susan lately was, "Disasters come in threes."

She wasn't certain that being evicted and becoming a parent by default qualified as actual disasters in the larger course of events. But in her own life they numbered significantly. Now she found herself awaiting the third.

If she was honest, things had been fine since she had moved in with Chase and Brian had arrived. Chase had given his bedroom to her and shared the other with Brian until he had left for Ireland two days before. And Brian was delighted at living by the beach. He made friends easily. In fact, Susan wondered why he was alone now.

"Where's your fan club?" she asked him.

He nodded toward the beach. "Surfing. I just came in to get some-

thing to eat. You coming down?" he asked her.

Susan shook her head. "I've got work to do. And Chase's new tenant is moving in today. I'm baking cookies as a welcome."

Brian brightened visibly. "Save some for me?"

"Of course." She waved him off.

The doorbell sounded just as she removed the last batch of cookies from the oven. "Hold on," she called out, smiling.

The smile vanished when she opened the door, for she found herself staring directly into the equally astonished eyes of Fidel's bartender.

For what seemed an eternity, neither of them spoke. Finally the man swallowed, stared, blinked and said, "I'm Miles Cavanaugh. The, uh, new tenant."

Susan's plate of cookies tilted precariously and would have fallen had not Miles caught them before they spilled all over the floor.

In the bar she had thought his hair was mostly dark, but now in the sunlight that streamed through her windows, Susan could see that the top layer was golden from the sun. And his eyes were blue-green, the color of the sea on a hot summer day, and they were following her every movement with the most arresting intensity she had ever experienced.

Forcing herself to blink and look away, she handed him the key. "Here you are."

Lean brown fingers accepted it. "Thanks." He turned to go, then stopped. "I appreciate your coming.

by and waiting so I could pick up the key, Miss, uh, Miss..."

"Rivers. Susan Rivers," she filled in bluntly. Then, because he unnerved her more than she wanted to admit, she added, "It was really no trouble. I live here."

His face fell. "You live here?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

Good, she thought, having created just the impression she wanted to create. She hoped he drew the line at trying to seduce women who lived with other men.

"Well, thanks," he muttered, and bolted out the door.

So much for Chase's promise not to rent the apartment to lascivious beach bums.

She didn't need to wonder any longer what her mother's third disaster was. She knew.

*

LEO HASTINGS prowled around Miles's living room-studio, then shuffled through the canvases along the wall. "So where are the new portraits?"

"Haven't done any."

"What?" Leo stalked from one end of the living room to the other. "I can't sell paintings you don't do, Miles." His tone was deceptively mild.

"I know that," Miles growled. His heart hadn't been in anything in the week and a half since he had moved except trying to get an occasional glimpse of Susan Rivers.

Leo's brows drew together. "Who have you got lined up?"

"No one." He glared at Leo defiantly.

"Then get someone. Go through that file box you keep. I need at least two more portraits, Miles."

"I've been through the file."

"And?"

"And I don't want to paint any of them."

Leo made an exasperated sound. "You can't paint portraits without people, Miles. It's a prerequisite. You're very good, Miles. There's a vision in you. But only you know what you're looking for, what will tap it." He stood up and clapped Miles on the shoulder—father, agent, mentor, friend—and he smiled. "Find her," he said, and he let himself out the door.

"Find her." The words echoed in Miles's mind long after he had watched Leo's departing back. Not "find it" but "find her."

Well, he had never doubted Leo's perceptiveness. "God works in mysterious ways," he mocked himself as he glanced at the clock.

Ordinarily he would be going to work. But tonight was Lottie's night behind the bar. In her eighth month of pregnancy, she wanted all the work she could get while she could still do it.

He tried to imagine Susan Rivers pregnant.

Cripes, he had to stop this. He wasn't even making sense. He'd better paint her before he lost his mind.

With studied nonchalance, he

sauntered barefoot across the porch to Susan's apartment. He rapped lightly on the door, then had immediate second thoughts. His gut twisted, and he began to back away.

The door opened.

"Oh," Susan said. "It's you. Hello." She looked at him expectantly.

His mind went perfectly blank. He swallowed, stared, swallowed again, finding his voice at last. After a week and a half of seeing her at a distance, he had forgotten the impact she had on him at close range. "Well, er, I wan...I mean, I was wondering..." Where was his glib bartender's tongue when he needed it?

"What can I do for you, Mr.avanaugh?"

"Pose for me."

She blinked.

Miles knew he was blushing furiously. "For a painting," he tacked on in a futile attempt to make sense.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm a painter," he elaborated. "Portraits, mostly. I—I'd like to er, paint...you."

"No, thank you." She started to shut the door.

He shoved his foot against the door before she could close it all the way, desperation moving him. "You have great bone structure and..." He looked at her helplessly. "Cheekbones, jaw, er, um..." His eyes trailed lower, touching her breasts, hips. But he swallowed the words.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Ca-

vanaugh," she said sarcastically, "for your professional appraisal."

And she shut the door very firmly on his foot.

PAINT HER portrait indeed! Did he think she would fall for a story like that? He made her madder than hell. And she didn't get any work done for the rest of the evening because of it.

The tapping on the front door was light, tentative almost. At first Susan thought she imagined it. Still, there it was.

"Who is it?"

"Miles."

She jerked open the door. "What is it this time?" she demanded, giving full play to the exasperation she felt.

He leaned against the doorjamb.

"I was wondering if you would give me a ride to the hospital?" he asked her, glancing down almost apologetically. "I think you may have broken my foot."

SHE WAS vastly relieved when they finally got back from the hospital to the apartment, where she could be finished with him. She unlocked the door for him while he hopped along on the crutches.

"My God," she said, staring after him into the dimly lit living room. "You really *do* paint!"

Miles stared at her as if she had lost her mind.

"I mean, well, I thought—" She waved her hands ineffectually.

"You thought...?" he asked her curiously.

"I thought it was a come-on!" she blurted.

He had the grace to look slightly abashed. "Well..."

"It was?"

"Not exactly..." He was looking the faintest bit crimson. "I did...I do want to paint you. I'm doing portraits for a show in mid-July." He jerked his head in the direction of a stack of canvases. His voice was slightly slurred, and he hobbled to one of the bedrooms at the back of the apartment.

Another surprise. His bedroom was far removed from the playboy's paradise she had half expected. Only the futon and a small dresser sat in the room. The rest was bare save for vast shelves filled with books. Not art books, such as she had seen in the living room, but theology, philosophy, ethics.

Good Lord. She took a look at the man on the futon and wondered if perhaps he changed identities in a phone booth on the way to work.

He looked up at her and gave her a vague, sleepy sort of smile. "I think the pain pills they gave me at the hospital are taking effect. I can't stand up. Sorry."

He moved his leg so that it stretched out carefully in front of him. Shutting his eyes, he sighed deeply.

Susan thought he looked weary and worn. Her eyes drifted down to the strong muscles of his thighs. Groaning, she put out the light and went back to the living room.

But she couldn't walk past the canvases he had painted without looking at them.

The first one was of an old lady, smiling as if she had the secret treasures of a lifetime in her eyes. Miles had painted her leaning against the railing of a pier, holding a fishing pole in her hand. The pole was entirely right and comfortable, and seeing it, Susan got an idea how the woman had learned about those secrets in her life.

There were several others. Two were of nubile young women. There was another of a middle-aged woman, serious and thoughtful. And another of a woman, the sort of nondescript type that Susan passed on the sidewalk every day of her life. But somehow the portrait caught her individuality—Miles had captured the struggles, the small triumphs, the satisfaction in her eyes.

She got slowly to her feet and put all the paintings back where she had found them. The thought that he actually wanted to paint her took on new meaning. She suddenly felt flattered rather than offended.

It was quite extraordinary, really—this attraction she felt toward him. It was more than a little frightening. When she had felt an overwhelming attraction to Geoff, she had embraced it wholeheartedly, had positively wallowed in it, because then she had been young and open-minded and was certain that happiness was her due. And after Geoff had died, she hadn't cared for a long time if she ever felt anything again.

Plenty of men "wanted" her—

her body at least. But she wanted love. She wanted a man who would want all of her—on all levels, the wit, the brains, the talent, the job, the moods, the successes and the failures of the whole woman, Susan Rivers. So far none had.

She had figured Miles Cavanaugh to be just another of those men.

Would he be interested in the real, total Susan Rivers—not just the pretty face? She just might agree to let him paint her, after all.

HIS BROKEN foot began to throb and all the events of the previous evening came back to him with perfectly miserable clarity. What a fool Susan Rivers must think he was! He lay back and tried to shed light on just what she had been thinking. First of all, she had been downright angry about his suggestion that he paint her because she thought it was a come-on. Weird. The woman who slept with every man in town was upset because he made a supposed pass at her? Unless, of course, she really wasn't what he had been thinking she was.

But if she wasn't, what was she? And why was she living with Chase Whitelaw? And why had she gone out for a "quick one" with the blond giant? And why was that teenager in and out of her apartment at all hours of the day and night?

All questions he couldn't answer.

He groped beside the futon for his crutches, then hauled himself to his feet and limped into the living room. He would have to call Lottie. She

would probably be glad for the work.

When the phone rang moments after he hung up, he didn't really want to answer it. Only the notion that it might be Susan calling to see how he was tempted him at all.

But it wasn't Susan.

"Cavanaugh?" he heard a gruff, familiar voice ask. "How is God's gift to art?"

Father Jack Morrissey had been the student master at the seminary Miles had attended. He was also the man Miles had once thought knew him better than anyone else in the world. His confidence in that assumption had been shaken to the core four years ago when Jack had been the one to put thumbs down on Miles's making solemn profession of vows.

"God's gift to art?" Miles murmured now. "That was your idea, Jack. Not mine. You told me I wasn't cut out for the priesthood," Miles reminded him sharply.

"I said I wasn't sure you were." Jack's voice was as patient and unhurried as ever. "Are you still painting, then?"

"Yes. I have a show coming up the middle of next month."

"Great," Jack said, not missing a beat. "I'm going to be in L.A. around that time. Can we get together, talk a bit?" He paused, then sighed. "You're a good man, Miles. It was a hard decision."

No kidding. It had been devastating for Miles.

"I know it's what you think you want," Jack had said calmly, as if

he hadn't just dropped a bombshell in Miles's life. "I know you've wanted it for a long time."

"Almost all my life," Miles choked out. His throat hurt. He couldn't swallow. This wasn't happening. Any second now Jack would smile and stand up, saying, "Just checking, kid. You pass."

But Jack didn't stand, and he didn't smile. He just sat there, shut his eyes and waited until Miles drew a deep, unsteady breath, and asked, "Why?"

"Because I think you don't have any idea of what you're going to be missing."

Miles shifted uncomfortably under Jack's stare. "I know the meaning of celibacy. I've been in the seminary since I was fourteen years old!"

"Exactly. I want what is best for you. And for a long time, I admit, I thought the priesthood was best. It was certainly better than becoming a cutthroat businessman like your father. But a decision like this one has got to be based on more than just running away from a bad alternative."

"I'm old enough to know what I want."

"Maybe. But you made that decision twelve years ago. As far as I know, you haven't questioned it since."

"I haven't," Miles said stubbornly.

"Well, I am." Jack was implacable. "Get a job, find a place to live on your own. Paint if you want.

Make some friends, have a good time. Meet a girl or two."

"Be a real live boy," Miles said bitterly.

Jack clapped Miles on the shoulder. "This is not irrevocable, you know. And no matter what, we'll keep in touch."

Miles purposely took a job he knew Jack would despise. He worked for his father for almost six months. But Miles had despised it, too. Even to spite Jack, he couldn't go against his soul.

After that he had done a series of odd jobs—carpentry mostly. It seemed fitting, somehow. But he didn't say much about it to Jack. Their correspondence dwindled. He didn't even think about the priesthood anymore.

And he was off balance now.

Jack's voice cracked over the long-distance line. "I did mean what I said, that the decision was not final. So, do you have time to spare for an old friend next month? I'll be in L.A. from the fifteenth on. What about that first Saturday? Will you be free?"

Miles glanced at the calendar above the sink. "Yeah. My show opens earlier that week, as a matter of fact. You can let me know what you think. It'll be good to see you."

"You, too, old son." Jack paused. "No hard feelings?"

Miles sighed. "No, Jack."

JUST BECAUSE he had artistic talent, he was not necessarily upstanding, God-fearing and all the rest of the

virtues that Susan's mother had advised her to look for in a man.

But other things kept occurring to her. There was his awkwardness when she had told him straight out that she had thought his asking to paint her was just a ruse. A true playboy would have been more blatant than that. And there was his apartment itself. Hardly the quintessential playboy pad. It looked more like a monk's cell.

The newspaper affiliate of *Sports View*, where she had worked until just a few months ago, was right next door. And it had a morgue where the old newspaper files were kept. She walked across the parking lot and went into it, determined to find out what she could about the mystery man next door.

She found small notices about art showings that Miles had had paintings in. The reviewer called Miles's portraits "insightful" and "probing."

A small monthlong showing in a gallery in West L.A. brought forth a more perceptive comment. "Miles Cavanaugh was a man who looked for other people's souls—and found them."

Susan leaned back against the wooden chair. If she let him paint her, would he find her soul, too? Susan smiled—a small, secretly satisfied smile. Then she heard a noise and looked up to find Nick Slaughter standing just inside the door, a distinctly hostile look on his face.

"Research?" Nick drawled, the word tossed like a gauntlet at her feet.

"I do it so I know what to talk about to the people I interview."

"You mean a few sweet nothings aren't enough?"

Susan's jaw tightened, and she brushed past him without a reply. But she could feel his cold hard eyes on her. A light shudder ran through her as she escaped into the elevator.

She spent the rest of the afternoon on the phone arranging an interview with a race-car driver. He was exactly the sort of man Nick Slaughter would expect her to work her wiles on, she thought wryly.

She stopped on the way home for pizzas. Going to Miles's apartment, she knocked briskly on the door before she had a chance for second thoughts.

"This one is for you," she said when he opened the door. "I noticed that you didn't have much in the way of food in the house. I thought this would help."

Miles raked his fingers through his hair. "Thanks. You didn't have to..."

"It was the least I could do." She straightened up and gave him a blinding smile. "And I've been thinking about your painting me..."

Miles swallowed. His brows lifted.

"If you still want to do it...the answer is yes."

*

HE STARED at her as if he had never seen her before.

Susan's hand went right to the buttons above her breasts, certain

that something was gaping open. Nothing was, but his eyes were following her. She could almost feel their touch as they slid down over the carefully combed fall of her hair, the neat long-sleeved oxford cloth blouse, the denim skirt, the curve of her calves.

"I wasn't sure what to wear," she began defensively. "You didn't say and... Well... what do you think?"

"I think you look like a nun." He gave an awkward sort of half laugh and walked around her, studying her from every angle.

She gave him a wry smile. "Obviously it's not what you had in mind."

"Er, no..." He was still circling her, almost nervously.

"What *did* you have in mind?"

He turned red. "Well, uh... maybe something a little less austere... a little more, er..."

"Sexy?" Her tone was wry. Somehow she couldn't take offense. He seemed too sheepish suddenly.

A corner of his mouth tilted up. "Well, now that you suggest it..."

"I'm not suggesting it," she said flatly. "I don't flaunt my looks."

"Oh." He frowned. "Then what was all that business in Fidel's that night? You walked in and cased the joint. You looked over every guy in the place."

"I was looking for someone. Houston Adams. I had an interview with him."

"Interview?"

"I'm a sportswriter," Susan exclaimed.

"A sportswriter?" he croaked. "As in baseball? Hockey?"

"As in basketball, which is what Houston Adams plays."

"Oh, Lord," he muttered, thinking back on that evening. "The tall blond guy?"

"The very one."

"But—" he remembered something else "—you only stayed five minutes or so!"

"We went jogging."

His mind boggled.

Susan's jaw jutted. "Trainer's orders. Houston's recovering from an injury. He thought he'd have time earlier, but he didn't. And I certainly had no desire to sit there waiting for Chase while you ogled me for the next hour."

Miles had the grace to blush. But the next minute he went on the attack again. "Yeah, what about Chase? Were you interviewing him, too?"

"No, I was planning to have dinner with him. When I had to cancel in order to keep the interview, we met for a drink instead. I was not," she added, "putting the make on him."

"You didn't have to," Miles said stubbornly. "You live with him."

"I didn't then. But even now that I do, I don't sleep with him." She half expected him to ask why not.

"What about that other guy?"

"What other guy?"

"The kid."

Susan grinned. "Brian is my brother."

"Your brother?" The words fell like lead balloons. He supposed it

was inevitable. Why not, after all? From a lady of the evening to all-American girl in ten minutes flat. Had he been right about anything? He looked at her closely and felt the now familiar race of his pulse.

He had been right about that, he decided. And damned little else. He ducked his head. "Sorry," he muttered.

She smiled so suddenly, he felt as if the sun had come out.

"I forgive you," she said.

THE MERE SIGHT of her looking up to smile at him from where she posed for her sittings was enough to start his heart playing jump rope. If this was what adolescence was like, he wasn't sorry to have missed it. Miles swallowed hard and tried to concentrate.

"I'm starting to paint today," he told her. He jerked his attention back to his palette where he had squeezed out far too much ochre. "I read some of your articles," he said abruptly, beginning to add lines to the linen canvas.

"Oh? Really?" Susan lifted an eyebrow in inquiry.

"They're very good."

"Thank you." She smiled then.

"Hold still," he barked. "Especially the Adams one," he added.

She held still—or tried to. Without moving her mouth, she said, "Yes, I liked that one. It turned out so well, they decided to make it a cover piece."

"You don't sound thrilled," Miles commented.

Susan shrugged, unable to help herself, then muttered, "Sorry. I am happy. But there's a guy in my office who thinks I... He thinks... I... thinks I do more than interview," she snapped, embarrassed. "Sound familiar?"

Take that, Miles thought, wincing. But he couldn't deny he deserved it. "You must get that a lot, huh?"

"A lot."

"Is that why you didn't want me to paint you?"

"One reason."

"What made you change your mind?"

"That." She pointed at the portraits that leaned against the far wall. "I was impressed. And humbled," she added. "I generally consider myself pretty observant," she explained. "It's part of my job—seeing things, hearing things. But I began to think that maybe I was making rash judgments."

He was stunned. And more than a little humbled himself. He had read her interviews. They showed tremendous insight and empathy. He thought he had a lot of work to do if he was going to live up to her expectations, and he said so.

"You're doing just fine," she assured him.

He forced himself to concentrate on painting. He became oblivious of the passage of time.

Susan's legs went to sleep. He seemed to stare at her continually but see her not at all. At least not in the way she was accustomed to being seen. It was both less unnerving

and more. Less because his look was no longer the simple lustful, hungry stare she so often encountered; and more because he seemed to be seeing right to her very heart.

Miles made one more stroke with his brush, then glanced at the clock. His jaw dropped. "Good Lord, you must be stiff as a statue."

Susan let her face crack into a larger smile. "Almost." Carefully, and with utmost caution, she eased her legs out from under her.

His eyes flickered from the woman stretching her limbs to the painting in progress. He had only got things in roughly, but it felt right. The colors were right. Her warmth came through. The brush strokes seemed to hint at her vibrancy, the contained energy within her. It wasn't a bad start.

She came and stood beside him, curious. She couldn't tell much so far. Except there was an intensity about it—about him—that she felt just looking at the incomplete picture. It seemed to hint at things about her, made her want to know herself better. She looked from it to him and back again.

"When will it be done?"

"Beginning of next week, maybe." When he was obsessed, he worked steadily for days. This could be one of those times.

"I'll be looking forward to it," she said cautiously. "I think."

"Worried?" Miles asked her, smiling. "Was it as bad as you thought?"

"No, actually. I thought it would be worse because...because you—"

her cheeks reddened "—because of what you see," Susan mumbled.

Miles wondered if she had any idea what he saw in her. She was such a package of contradictions—effervescent, yet shy; beautiful but self-conscious; regal, though surprisingly homey. His eyes dropped, and he saw her wriggling her toes. The sight both amused and attracted him. He wanted to touch them—to touch her. He wanted to run his palms up the smooth skin of her calves, to slide them under her skirt and... He rocked back on his heel and closed his eyes, barely stifling the groan that welled up in his throat at the logical conclusion of that thought.

WHILE HE PAINTED her, he found out that she was a small-town Midwestern girl, the second daughter, the middle child. She turned out to be a homebody, a person who got more out of an interesting conversation than a loud party. She loved to learn what made people tick. The way she looked at him when she said that made a shiver run right down his back.

Susan found out that he was from a wealthy northern California family, the second son, also the middle child. He had a younger brother just as she did, but he was willing to bet that his was more of a troublemaker than hers.

"Did you always want to be a painter, Miles?" she asked him now.

He didn't say anything for a long

moment, as if he were assessing her. "No," he said at last. "A priest."

Susan's jaw dropped.

"Close your mouth," Miles said abruptly. "I'm painting it." He was scowling fiercely, as if, were she to say the wrong thing, he might display a formidable temper.

"Why?"

"It was the furthest thing from my father I could imagine," he said bluntly, stopping painting. "He's a wheeler-dealer businessman who would cut his mother's throat if it would get him a few bucks. When my mother died, he sent me to a seminary high school. Eddie he took into the business. He was old enough. Austin he ignored. But me—I was going to be a priest!" He gave a harsh laugh. "Atonement to Almighty God in the hope that I would pray for his soul! It seemed like the perfect answer for both of us."

"But it wasn't?"

"No." His voice was bitter.

"Lots of people change their minds about things, Miles."

"I didn't change my mind! It got changed for me!" He leaned back his head and lifted his eyes to the ceiling as he told her about Father Jack's decision.

He laughed then, a short, harsh laugh. "D'you know why?" he demanded, intense eyes drilling right into her. "Because I painted women. He told me to get them out of my system. Then I could think about coming back."

He stared down at his painting of her, his face in torment. Then he

looked from the portrait to the real woman. He looked lost, confused, hungry. And without thinking, Miles moved toward her, dropping to his knees, his eyes a storm-ridden sea of emotions.

She raised up to meet him. His lips were every bit as giving as Susan had imagined them to be. She could feel the hammering of his heart in time with her own. Feelings she thought she had buried with Geoff surged through her blood.

He groaned, tasting her sweet warmth, letting it surround him. Only the present mattered. Only Susan and himself, lips fused, bodies clinging, hearts thundering. He had a new vision of eternity, a new definition of heaven.

But this was earth, and the kiss ended, and they drew apart, staring at each other, shaken to the core.

HE HAD FINISHED the portrait. As she stood looking at it, she smiled. Her eyes flickered up to meet his. Susan's smile widened. "You've seen *me*," she said softly.

The painting stunned her. It caught a part of her so few people ever saw. At last she was more than just a pretty face. Miles had painted her as a whole person—a living, breathing human being. Body and soul. He had found the key to her being. And looking at it, she thought she saw bits of him, too. She had been looking for this man for a long time. He was the soul mate she had been seeking, the person who would see her as she was. She had nearly

despaired of finding such a man again after Geoff died.

"I feel like you've seen me through and through." *Seen me the way I feel when I look at you*, she wanted to add.

Miles stuck his hands in his pockets and took a step backward. "So, you won't have to pose for me anymore."

"No."

The thought depressed her. A week ago if someone had told Susan she would regret not having to let a man stare at her for upwards of three hours at a time, she would have said they were crazy. But she would miss the sessions with Miles.

"I think I'm a little disappointed that you're done." Her smile was sheepish. "I must be an exhibitionist, after all."

Miles looked at her for a long moment, as if weighing something important in his mind; then he turned and stared out at the surfers. "Leo—my agent—thought I ought to paint you again." *Shut up, Miles*, he told himself. *Just shut up*. "He thought I ought to go one step further," he went on, some perverse part of him heedless of sanity and caution. "He thinks I should paint you nude."

Susan knew she ought to feel horrified. She ought to slap his face.

She *wanted* him to look at her! And instead of anxiety, she felt a blatantly sexual stirring within her at the very idea. Her entire body tingled, tempting her. She bit down on her lip. Did she dare?

They turned and looked at each other, blue-green and blue-gray eyes

locked in an almost physical embrace.

"Will you?" Miles asked hoarsely.

"Yes."

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POSING NUDE was a bit like going to the dentist, Susan thought. It was the thinking beforehand that was the hard part. Once you were there... well, you were there, that's all.

She expected to feel cold. Clammy with nerves. She didn't think even the heat from the lights would warm her.

But the look on Miles's face did. It was like sunlight.

Miles wished he could pretend professional detachment again. He couldn't do it. She was glorious. His eyes traced the curve of her shoulder, lingering on the firm ivory mounds of her breasts, with their rosy tips. His fingers clenched on the pencil. He drew the line to her waist, then the gentle rise of her hip. His eyes were drawn to the dark triangle that shielded more of her mysteries. He took a deep, shuddering breath as he felt the hard press of his own need to explore them. His pencil wavered as he drew the line of her legs. He moved closer, changed angles, drew another. And another yet again.

Every bit of need, every ache, every ounce of his frustration, went into his work. It flowed right through his pencil onto the paper, then into the charcoal onto the can-

was until there were almost two dozen Susan Riverses tempting him.

He was wrung out by the time he was done.

"That's enough," he said at last, slamming the palette onto the table. "Get dressed."

Susan blessed him with a blinding smile. "If you can be ready in half an hour, I'll treat you to dinner."

"IT'S BEEN A marvelous evening." His finger traced the lobe of her ear. "How about a nightcap?"

"Cognac in a jelly glass?" Susan teased.

He grinned. "Probably."

They walked quietly by her own apartment where Brian and a friend were having a sleepover and went into his. Susan went to sit on the futon while Miles hunted through his liquor cupboard. Susan was right. They would be drinking out of jelly glasses.

He handed one to Susan. She raised it in salute as he sat down beside her.

"To Miles," she said softly. "The man in my life."

Miles swallowed audibly. Then he clinked his glass gently against hers. "To Susan." And if he couldn't bring himself to say, "The woman in mine," he hoped at least that she could read it in his eyes.

He bent slowly toward her and touched her lips with his, tasting the cognac there, sweeter now for having mingled with the taste of Susan.

"Ah, Miles," she said, sighing,

and reached for him, too. "I'm glad, so glad." And then she kissed him.

It was a long kiss, building slowly, coaxing everything it could out of him. He leaned his head against her hair when they had pulled apart at last.

"Amazing," he whispered.

Susan pressed a kiss against his chest. "What's amazing?"

"This. You. Me. Everything." He kissed her again, and his hand curved against her breast.

Susan lifted her head, her expression serious. "I care about you more than I've ever cared about any man since my husband."

"Your husband?" He drew back, the breath knocked out of him.

The force of his reaction caught Susan off balance. He looked stunned, aghast, horrified. She couldn't fathom it. "I'm not divorced," she told him quickly, thinking that must be the problem. "Geoff died."

"I thought..." His mind was on a roller-coaster ride. He raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't know what I thought," he said dully.

"I didn't realize it would matter," Susan said stiffly.

She couldn't figure him out. Unless he expected her not to have been touched by another person, which was contrary to everything he had first thought about her, she couldn't figure out what was going through his head. What was his problem?

His problem was—pure and simple—sex. How could he fumble his

way through making love for the first time with a woman who had already been married, whose experience, judging from the way she said Geoff's name, had to have been both extensive and good? The very idea made him burn with embarrassment.

Susan touched his shoulder. "Miles?"

His expression shuttered suddenly, and his jaw grew tight. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Susan shrugged. "You didn't ask. I never thought it would make all that much difference. Geoff is dead, after all. He has been for four years."

Miles turned to look at her. He shut his eyes. "What happened?"

"A friend of ours, a mountain climber, like Geoff, asked him to go to China. They had been on Everest together. He died in a freak storm on Nun Kun only a little more than six months after we were married."

Miles didn't realize until he let the air out of his lungs how long he had been holding his breath. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Thank you. But it happened a long time ago. And I have picked up my life again. I'm over Geoff now, believe me."

Miles believed her. But he couldn't believe she wouldn't compare. And he couldn't believe that Geoff hadn't been a far better lover than he would ever be.

"It doesn't matter," he said, wishing with all his heart that that were the truth.

ALL HER explanations about Geoff, all her honesty and laying her heart on the line, seemed to Susan to have accomplished naught. There was no reason Miles Cavanaugh should be backing away from her. But backing away he definitely was.

Oh, they still saw each other. He still painted her, and—whether he realized it or not—he still cherished her with his eyes while he painted. Everyday she confirmed how much he wanted her—at least on a physical level. But in every other way he became increasingly remote. It hurt, damn it, but she didn't let him see how much.

The nude portrait was coming to an end. And as it did, Susan wondered what would happen next. Would he simply bow out of her life, say, "Thank you very much for allowing me to expand my artistic horizons," and become the remote next-door neighbor she had once prayed he would be?

She parked her car in the garage, slung her huge straw bag over her shoulder and walked up the sidewalk toward the apartment. She stopped short, shocked to see a strange man sitting by Miles's front door. He had a very definite south-of-the-border tan that highlighted his fair hair. And when he looked up, he had a most devastating smile.

"Well, hello there." He got to his feet in one lithe movement, holding out his hand. "I'm Austin Cavanaugh," he told her. "Miles's brother."

Her smile widened. "The ne'er-do-well."

Austin made a face. "My reputation precedes me."

MILES WAS at the far end of the bar, pulling a beer and talking to a customer. Austin stared, a slow grin spreading across his face. "Well, I'll be damned." He shouldered his way through the happy-hour crush.

"Two beers, my good man," Austin ordered imperiously, rapping his knuckles on the highly polished oak.

"Be right wi—" Miles turned, his eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. The beer he was pulling kept right on going over the top of the glass.

"Austin?" he croaked. "Susan?" His voice took on an entirely new strain when he saw who was with his brother. "What are you doing here?"

"Hiding out, actually," Austin said with disarming frankness. "I'm lying low because Daddy Dearest is trying to find me."

"Again? What have you done this time?"

"I'm making redwood decks and patio furniture. And he wants to buy me out."

Susan watched their conversation like a tennis match.

"Lucrative, I suppose." Miles pulled two more beers and sailed them down the bar to customers.

"Of course," Austin said as if there was no question.

Susan looked at Miles to see how he took this monumental confidence,

but he merely nodded as if it were gospel.

"So, where are you hiding?"

"With you?" It was a question, and yet it wasn't. There was a wealth of hope in the two words, and Susan knew Miles had heard them before.

Miles sighed and dug into his pocket, fished out his house key and shoved it across the bar at his brother. "Here. But don't make yourself too comfortable. And keep your hands off what's mine." He gave Austin a steely stare. Volumes seemed to pass between them in wordless silence.

"Including neighbors?"

Miles sucked in his breath. Trust Austin to show up at a time like this.

IT SEEMED to Susan that she saw far more of Austin Cavanaugh than she did his brother. Miles might have been no more than a distant acquaintance for all he appeared in her life. It was driving her nuts.

Her only consolation was that it seemed to be driving Miles nuts, as well. For the hunger was still in his eyes when he looked at her, and the vibrations between them were stronger than the bass on Brian's stereo.

*

"SANTA JACINTA?" Susan looked up at her editor, Cale George, in astonishment. "I thought you were having Slaughter cover that."

Cale looked over his shoulder as

if the man in question might be sneaking up on him. "We were. But several of the golfers won't talk to him. He's the one who spilled the beans about Whosits and the other guy's wife last year. Remember?"

"Ah, yes." Susan clicked her tongue, making indignant noises. "That's our Nick. Moral to the core." Susan shook her lush full head of hair. "Have you told Slaughter yet?" she asked him.

Cale grimaced. "No, he's not in now."

"Marvelous. Then I'll just make a quick getaway before he comes in," Susan said, gathering up her gear.

Cale cocked his head and asked, "You afraid of him, too, Sue?"

Susan had never mentioned any of the run-ins she had had with Nick Slaughter. She had no intention of starting to complain now. "Let's just say I have a healthy respect for his, er, talent."

MILES'S DISTRACTION was obvious. Susan would have liked to have comforted him. But she couldn't. He had shut her out too often. But she did smile at him, and she did squeeze his hand just before they walked in the gallery.

Miles would have liked to have held on to her hand all night. But Leo made that impossible. Leo had a hundred people for him to meet. Miles lost Susan in the shuffle. But wherever he stood, her portrait stared down at him. Her eyes kept

watching him with the loving hunger he saw in them so often.

And his own hunger began to build.

"You've made it!" Leo beamed.

But Miles—his eyes following Susan—wondered if he had. He might get the critical acclaim that he had sought, the commissions, the money. But they all paled against the thought of having Susan.

Then he saw her standing next to him again, and his heart kicked over in his chest.

"Is it for sale?" a voice behind them asked.

Susan, recognizing it, turned and laughed. "Not to you, Houston. You remember Miles?"

Miles turned, too, stiffening when he realized it was the athlete she'd been with the first night he saw Adams. He nodded curtly. "No, it's not for sale," he said abruptly. Miles put his hand over Susan's, wrapping his fingers tightly.

Astonished, Susan looked at him, wondering at the possessive press of his fingers. But she wasn't about to object, and she was grateful for their presence when Leo Hastings said to everyone within earshot, "That portrait is undoubtedly Miles's best work so far. Imagine how marvelous a nude of her would be! Such skin tone. Such bone structure."

Susan wished the floor would open up and swallow her. When she heard Miles start suddenly, then swallow hard, she feared he might admit he was doing one. But he remained silent. And when she lifted

her eyes, she expected to see his firmly fixed on the floor.

She was surprised to see him staring hard at her.

"I've been trying to convince him," Leo chuntered on. "But he isn't listening."

"If you'll excuse me," Miles said suddenly. "I think we could use a bit of air."

And without waiting or consulting Susan, he hauled her across the crowded gallery and out the open door.

"It was a risk for you, letting me paint you, wasn't it?" he demanded, voicing something that had been playing over his mind. It had been years since Miles had taken a risk. He had never laid his heart on the line since the day Jack Morrissey had shot his first set of dreams out of the sky. "You dared to trust me. Why?"

"Because I...wanted...you...to...know...me." She took the biggest risk of all and gave him her heart in her eyes.

And Miles accepted it. "Oh God, Susan!" he muttered. Then, reaching for her, he wrapped her in his arms and found her lips with a desperation born of days of denial, weeks of frustration, years of emptiness.

Susan melted against him, her heart singing. She didn't understand what had happened in there, what had brought about this turn of events. She didn't care.

Miles turned her in his arms and locked his hands behind the small of her back, resting his forehead

against hers. "What time do you leave tomorrow for Santa Jacinta?"

"I have a seven-o'clock flight." She wanted to tell him that it would be time enough. She waited, hoping he would say it himself.

He didn't. Instead, he said, "And when do you get back?"

"Three days."

"Mmm." He seemed to be weighing things in his mind. Then he exhaled sharply. "Three days?" He didn't sound as if he thought it was the eternity that it seemed now to her. "All right."

Susan drew back, looking up at him oddly. From his tone she knew he had come to some sort of decision.

THE GOLFERS were looking at her strangely.

Susan began to notice it late that first afternoon. She had arranged to have coffee with two of the leaders. One had had a bad experience with Nick and was one of the reasons she had the job. She was anxious to show him that not all *Sports View* reporters were brash, insensitive clods.

She was prepared with good solid questions. But their answers were slow. They were looking at her oddly.

Susan frowned. "You were expecting to talk to me?" she queried at one point. "You did get my note?"

"Oh, indeed we did," one of them assured her. The other snickered and rested his arm along the

back of Susan's chair. She found herself wondering who was at fault in the Nick Slaughter interview last year.

She was relieved when a waitress appeared at her elbow and said, "Telephone, Ms. Rivers."

Saved by the bell, Susan thought, standing up quickly. She smiled and made her excuse.

"That's all?" The one who had been pursuing her inch by inch across the restaurant floor frowned.

Susan frowned, too, surprised. "I think so, yes."

"Well, hell," he drawled, pushing back his chair. "Don't promise what you won't deliver next time."

And with that he stalked off. The other man mumbled an apology, his face almost as red as his berry-bright golf slacks. Then he followed his colleague.

Susan stared after them, perplexed. Then, recalling the waitress's message, followed her to the phone.

"Sue?" It was her editor. His voice was hard and angry. "There're drawings of you going around," he told her bluntly. "Nude drawings. They're signed Cavanaugh."

"My God." Susan almost stopped breathing. "What do you mean 'going around'? Going around where?"

"The first I heard of it was from Houston Adams earlier this afternoon. He got them along with a typed note asking if he had got his money's worth after the interview he gave you."

Susan choked. She shut her eyes and prayed to self-destruct. Her hand trembling, Susan hung up.

She immediately tried Miles's number. She needed to talk to him, to ask what had happened. But though the phone rang ten times, he never answered. It was too early for him to be at Fidel's. So where was he? She tried again an hour later.

Nothing.

What was going on?

MILES HAD spent the morning at the public library, raising the librarian's eyebrows at his choice of reading material. Male virginity and how to overcome it was a grossly underresearched topic, he discovered. There was little comfort in reading that over twenty percent of adult men were still virgins. It was his own inexperience that worried him and no one else's.

He made up his mind that he was going to learn all he could before Susan got home on Sunday. He would stow the books away discreetly so that Austin would never find out.

He tried not to think about Austin at all. He was still furious with his brother for his having uncovered the sketches and the nude painting of Susan. Miles had no trouble imagining what Austin would make of the reading material.

Tucking the bag tightly under his arm, he let himself into the apartment. A few moments later there was hammering on the front door.

A red-faced, furious Houston Adams stood on the porch.

"I know I wanted to buy a painting of Susan," he said to Miles in a freezing voice, "but this wasn't exactly what I had in mind!"

He thrust photocopies of two of Miles's drawings into his hands, along with a typewritten note. And when Miles took them, Houston socked him in the jaw.

But the blow didn't rock Miles as hard as the photocopies did. He stared, blanched, swallowed. Please, God, no! "Where did you get these?" he demanded, his voice hoarse.

Adams stared at him, incredulous. "You didn't send them?" he mocked.

"No!"

"Then who the hell did?"

Austin? But that didn't make sense. Nick Slaughter. But that made even less sense. Slaughter hadn't had access to his paintings, for heaven's sake. Unless... unless...

HE FOUND his brother asleep. He looked young, vulnerable and innocent. Miles grabbed him by the shirtfront and shook him hard, pleased to see the vulnerability vanish. Miles yanked the photocopies out of his pocket and shoved them in his brother's face.

"I know damned well you didn't send them. So who did? Hell, for all I know, the whole damned sports world is looking at them now!"

Austin stared at him, his eyes

wide with shock, the color fled from his face. "Oh, God," he said. "I never meant to... Oh, jeez, Miles."

Miles pushed him back against the headboard of the bed. "Who, damn it? And what? Tell me every bit of it. Now!"

"I was putting clothes away when I found the picture. And the sketches. I took them out. About that time this guy came to the door."

"What guy?"

"Slaughter."

Miles shut his eyes and groaned. "What the hell did you do, just say, 'Come on in and take a look'?"

Austin grimaced. "It wasn't like that. He was looking for Susan. I said she was gone. He said he'd wait. So he sat down and waited. I went for a swim. I had Susan's portrait sitting on the easel." Austin swallowed audibly. "A couple of the sketches..." Austin straightened up. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't think—"

Miles snarled.

"I'm sorry," Austin said. "Hell, Miles, I didn't mean to hurt her." He waved a hand ineffectually. "You really ought to punch me in the mouth."

"I know," Miles said, whirling around. And without another thought, he did.

SLAUGHTER'S APARTMENT was at the far end of a long second-floor walkway overlooking a pool. The whole building had a sort of plastic decadence that seemed fitting to

Miles. The pink flamingos and shallow morals went well together.

He knocked on the door.

"Slaughter?" he said to the tall, husky man wearing a warm-up suit who opened it and frowned at him.

"Yeah."

"My name is Cavanaugh."

"I don't know any—" Slaughter began, but he didn't finish, for Miles pushed him into the apartment.

"You have some phoning to do." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the pictures. "You need to explain these."

Slaughter smirked. "Pretty, isn't she?"

"Pretty likely to sue you," Miles said. He picked up the phone. "Start calling. Tell everyone exactly how you got those pictures and why you sent them."

Slaughter lunged, knocking Miles to the floor. Miles landed a blow to his stomach. The feel of his fist against the soft flesh was infinitely satisfying. Slaughter shot his fist forward, nailing Miles's right eye. Miles's fists flew, pummeling Slaughter, slamming into his chest, his stomach, his jaw.

"Aw right," Slaughter choked at last. "Aw right. For God's sake, lemme up."

Miles drew back, still straddling Slaughter. He yanked the phone off the table and thrust it into Slaughter's hand.

Before Miles got off him, Slaughter had called everyone on the list he had sent drawings to. In a choking voice he had made apologies, had proclaimed Susan's innocence.

*

"I DID IT," Austin confessed the minute Susan got home. He unfolded himself from the front porch and followed her into her apartment. He had a bloody lip. "I gave Slaughter the drawings."

"You?"

"I didn't mean any harm, Sue," he muttered, anguished. "Hell, I had no idea he would—" He slumped in a chair and leaned forward. She filled the ice pack, handing it to Austin to press against his swollen mouth.

"Who gave that to you?" Susan asked.

"Miles."

"Miles!"

Austin nodded. He held his head in his hands and told her everything.

Susan listened, her mind spinning. She felt an odd detachment. It made perfect sense. After his being bumped off Santa Jacinta she was sure Nick would have been out for blood.

But she realized something as she sat and listened to Austin's story—and that was that, while she was embarrassed, she wasn't undone by what had happened. Miles had given her a confidence. Until now she had seen her body only as an obstacle to her success. Now she saw that it was just a part of who she was.

"Where's Miles?" she demanded.

Austin shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose he went looking for Slaughter."

"He didn't. He wouldn't!"

Austin smiled for the first time that day. "Oh, yes."

Susan walked to the door. "Do me a favor, Austin?"

"Anything," he said fervently.

"Brian's still away at a friend's house. Stay here at my place to-night. I'm going to wait next door for Miles."

SHE SAT in his living room, staring at the painting of herself on the easel, then flipping through the sketch pad, seeing herself as Miles saw her. She saw the love in those drawings and in the painting. Where was he? she wondered. She couldn't imagine he would punch Slaughter in the mouth the way he had Austin. Poor Austin. She hoped his mouth didn't hurt too much. She almost felt she owed him something for having created this situation that made her see so clearly that she now accepted herself.

The door finally opened and Miles walked in. She spoke as he turned on the light. "Miles?"

"Susan?" He stopped warily, his hand still on the light switch.

"It's all right," she said, but her smile faded when she saw his face. His lip was almost as bad as Austin's, his eye worse. "I know you didn't have anything to do with it," she said, getting up and going to him. "Are you all right?"

He wanted to sink into her arms, to bury his face in her neck. Miles's mouth cracked into a painful grin. "I had the wrath of God on my side.

You ought to see Slaughter," he said.

"I'd like to."

She washed his cuts, put ointment on his lip, then drew him to his feet. She led him into his bedroom and was unbuttoning his shirt.

He gazed longingly at the brown paper parcel where all the knowledge he needed was. He could hardly tell her to wait, that he had a couple of articles to read first!

With a boldness she hadn't thought was in her, she continued, sliding her hands down farther, across his jutting hipbones, letting them brush against the hard maleness pressing into the fabric of his jeans.

Miles shuddered and gripped the window frame. "Susan!" He made a strangled sound. He was so afraid of disappointing her. "I can't..." he muttered. "It... it wouldn't be... Oh, cripes," he moaned, hot with embarrassment, "I'm a virgin!"

After the obstacles she had imagined—that he didn't love her, that he didn't want her, that he was only too willing to turn his back on her love because she meant nothing more than a painting to him—this was a blessing, not a curse!

Susan continued to smile. "Do you want to make love with me?" she asked him softly.

"Hell, yes."

"Then, let's."

Miles sucked in his breath slowly, gathering courage, seeing the love in her eyes that made it all right. "While I was at the seminary, I didn't have a lot of opportunities to

get to know the opposite sex." He swallowed hard.

Susan stroked a hand through his hair. "I love you," she told him. "And if you want me, I'm yours. Everything will be fine. I'll prove it to you."

"Sue—"

She heard an edge of protest in his voice. "Shh." She whispered as she knelt beside him, her fingers working at the few buttons still done up on his shirt. Susan drew his shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, tossing it aside. Miles's expression was grave, almost reverent, as he returned the favor, peeling her blouse slowly off her.

His heart pounded, and his loins ached. He lay down, pulling her on top of him, fitting her body to his in the age-old pattern of love, his fingers fumbling, learning the intricacies of the hook and eye on her bra. His artist's fingers were thumbs now. He struggled, muttered, kissed her, cursed and—there!

He lifted her away from him, delighting in the way her nipples hardened against the tips of his fingers. His lips touched her breast, and then he drew on it deeply, suckling. A soft, exquisite sound came from her throat.

"Oh, Miles." She bent over him.

This was everything he had ever dreamed of. Susan, her dark hair in a wild, tangled halo around her head, her blue-gray eyes heavy lidded with desire. He had imagined Susan loving him all the time he had been painting her. But he hadn't

come close to the reality he beheld now.

She bent over him, her fingers undoing the snap of his jeans, peeling them down his legs. He was, Susan thought, the most beautiful man she had ever seen.

The cloud of her hair billowed across him, caressing his chest and arms like the gentlest of butterfly wings. Her mouth moved upward, touching the pulse that beat at the base of his throat, then graced his chin briefly before lighting on his mouth.

His hands on her skin now were hot and slightly rough. They trembled as they skimmed the clothes down her legs and off, then moved tantalizingly back up. His eyes were as dark as a storm-ridden sea.

Dipping her head, she kissed his ankle, then the side of his foot. The one he had broken—the one that had begun it all. Her smile tantalized him, seduced him. Her fingers, then her mouth, rode slowly higher, her breath fanning his thighs. And when her hand found him at last, his breathing came in quick, hungry gasps.

Susan moved up quickly, covering his mouth with hers as the climactic storm shook him. She curled against him, smiling, her cheek hot against his damp chest as she listened to the receding thunder of his heart.

"Susan?" His voice was no more than a croak. "I...I wanted..."

She kissed his chest. "Don't worry. We have all the time in the world."

Miles didn't know how long they lay in their own private universe. Minutes. Hours. But it seemed no time until his nerve endings were awake again and his whole being was clamoring for her.

His hands learned the contours of her back, the curve and dip, the soft swell of her buttocks. He feathered kisses between her breasts and down past her navel. When he had painted her, he had only hinted at the shadowed mysteries of her femininity. But now...

Susan's legs parted for him, sharing with him her secrets, letting his fingers find her, stroke her. Her head fell back, and she shuddered under his intensely passionate touch.

"Miles!"

She reached for him, and he obliged. There was no time to worry, no time to wonder. His hands slid beneath her, lifting her as she placed her hand on him, drawing him deeply, fully inside her.

He trembled. Then Miles began to move, slowly at first, learning the warm, moist, velvety home he had been given. Then, when the need grew stronger, his movements quickened, his jaw tightened, his face grew taut. Susan lifted her arms to link them behind his neck, drawing him down so their lips touched. A fog of longing closed over her, and she moved to meet him—body and soul—and the two became one.

He spent most of the night making up for lost time. He was, they both decided, a fast learner. By the time the first rays of rose-gray dawn

peeked in the windows, he had learned quite a lot.

SUSAN AWOKE, sore, sleepy and supremely satisfied. She twisted to look at Miles, surprised to find him already awake. Her eyes went to where the sheets tangled low on his hips and she could see renewed evidence of his desire.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him, and Miles surged inside her. Moments later the sweet shudders of climax rocked them both.

Miles gasped, and Susan laughed. She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll make breakfast. Are you hungry?"

"Ravenous."

She put on her slacks and one of Miles's clean shirts, knotting it at her midriff.

She raided the refrigerator. She hulled some strawberries, made coffee, then cracked some eggs into a bowl and fried bacon. She hummed a little as she moved around, following whatever Miles was singing in the bathroom.

"How you doing?" she called at last. "It's almost ready."

"I'm shaving. Half a face left."

She was beginning to dip the first slices of bread into the batter for French toast when she heard a knock at the door.

She hurried to the door, a deliriously happy grin on her face. The man who stood there was tall and spare and seemed as surprised to see her as she was to see him. He wore

black shoes, a shiny black suit. And a Roman collar.

"Good morning," he said a bit cautiously. "Perhaps I've come to the wrong address. I'm looking for Miles Cavanaugh. My name is Father Jack Morrissey."

Sheer blind panic gripped her. She prayed for cool, calm rationality and wasn't surprised to find it.

"You have the right address," she told Father Morrissey, her voice only slightly wavery. "Won't you come in?" Obviously Father Morrissey felt that he was expected. "I live next door. I was just leaving, actually." And with a quick smile that owed more to desperation than cordiality, she flew out the door.

In her own apartment she grabbed her keys and her purse, noted with complete detachment that Chase had come home and was sleeping in her bed.

"THAT WAS the most beautiful night of my life," Miles said, knotting a towel around his waist and opening the bathroom door. "And you are the most beautiful—" He glanced around the room, panic growing. "Where's Susan?" Miles demanded.

"Your 'neighbor'?"

"More than my neighbor," Miles said bluntly.

"Ah," said Jack. "I was afraid of that. She, er, left."

"Damn it! What'd you say to her?"

Jack spread his hands. "Not a thing."

Miles shook his head despairingly. "You wouldn't have to. You'd only have to show up looking like that and..." His voice trailed off. He sprinted into the bedroom and pulled on a pair of jeans, hastily snapping them as he came into the living room.

"She's obviously very important."

"You could say that. I want to marry her." He bolted out the door and crossed the porch, hammering on her apartment door, jerking it open when no one answered.

"Susan?"

There was a muffled noise from her bedroom. He strode in. "Listen, Susan, you don't understand. Jack's just a friend. He's not here because—"

Chase rolled over in bed and fixed Miles with one sleep-shot eye. "Not here because of what?" he asked, a grin lifting the corner of his mouth.

"You?" Miles blanched. "Where the hell is Susan?"

Chase shrugged a bare shoulder. "Well, your brother said she was staying with you. But now I really couldn't say." He squinted at the clock. "Are you two-timing her with someone called Jack, for God's sake?"

"No! And tell her I want to see her if she comes back. It's important. Very important! Got that?"

Chase gave him a thumbs-up sign, then crashed back on the bed and began to snore again.

Cursing, Miles stalked back to his own apartment. What the hell was he going to do now?

"Find her?" Jack asked.

"No." Miles flung himself down on the futon.

"She's the girl in the portrait, isn't she?" Jack asked conversationally.

"You saw?"

"I went to the showing last night. It was marvelous. You've grown, Miles. And I knew even before I met her that you love her. It shows."

"Wonderful." Everybody knew it now but Susan.

He found Jack watching him, a concerned look on his face. It was the look he remembered the last time Jack had turned his life upside down.

"It will work out," Jack promised him gently.

"Please, God," Miles muttered, and wished he felt the same confidence as Jack.

HE HAD NEVER said he wasn't going back to the priesthood. And that brought Susan to remembering all the things Miles had said. "Jack said I can come back later. After I get my priorities straight."

Well, as of last night, Miles had certainly got women straightened out in his mind, Susan thought bitterly.

And it wasn't as if he had seduced her, either. She hadn't let him give no for an answer. Her cheeks burned at the recollection of how forward she had been last night.

She drove around aimlessly until she realized that in her present frame

of mind she was undoubtedly a hazard on the road.

She was going to have to go back home and face Miles. She was going to have to listen to him while he politely explained to her what the first priority was in his life. Everything he did would be right and proper. He would explain, comfort, console.

But then he would go.

The drive home didn't take more than twenty minutes. She needed longer. She needed aeons, she thought, to gain the composure she would require to steel herself to hear what Miles had to say. The most important thing was not to think about what had happened last night. If she could just manage that, she might not crack.

Chase and Austin were in the apartment when she arrived. She looked around the room carefully, as if Miles might jump out from behind a couch. When Chase said, "Want a cup of coffee?" without anything else happening, Susan breathed easier.

"Please." She sank into a chair.

There was a knock on the door.

Neither Austin nor Chase moved a muscle. The knock came again, sharp and impatient.

"Isn't anyone going to answer the door?" she asked.

Chase gave her an expectant look, nodded in her direction and made a sweeping gesture with his hand that indicated all too clearly who he thought ought to do it.

Susan glared at him. Then, when she got no other response, she got up and went to the door.

Miles looked as bad as she felt. "I'd like to talk to you," he said quietly.

Not trusting herself to answer, she nodded.

Miles ushered her out of the apartment, across the wide beach toward the water. It was hard enough, to ask the woman you love to marry you. It was sheer disaster to contemplate doing it when she would probably like your head on a plate.

"Look, Susan, about this morning. I'm...sorry. I forgot Jack was coming. He called me weeks ago, and we set it up then. I would never have—"

She rounded on him, her control snapping. "Don't you dare tell me you would never have made love to me if you had remembered," she flared. "What was it, all part of some master plan you had?"

Miles stared at her, confounded. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"It's what you wanted, isn't it? To have a woman and then go back to the seminary." She slapped her hands on her hips and glared at him. "And there I was, ready and willing."

"You think that's why I—"

"Well, I hardly gave you a chance to say no," she replied scornfully.

"Susan." He grabbed her hands. "I didn't want to say no!" He started to grin, unable to help himself. "I love you."

Susan snorted, disbelieving. She jerked her hands away from him and started walking away.

"Hey..." Miles sprinted after her. "I mean it. Did you really think I was going back to the priesthood, for God's sake?"

"Yes, I did!"

Miles jerked her to a stop. "Listen to me. I do not want to be a priest. I gave up that idea long ago."

"Then what was this Father Whosits doing on your doorstep this morning?"

"He's an old friend." Of all the things he had thought she would be upset about today, that hadn't even occurred to him. It was her own embarrassment he was concerned about, not that she might actually think he was considering the priesthood. "I like my life the way it is. I like Fidel's, odd as it may seem. I also want to paint. But most of all, I want you. I love you. I want to marry you."

Susan looked suspicious. "You want to marry me?"

"Yes! I even told Jack I did!"

She weighed this, then frowned. "Figures."

Miles glowered, taken aback. "What do you mean, 'figures'?"

"I mean, you would," she retorted, angry now. "It's the correct thing to do after your Father Morrisey caught us in a compromising position this morning."

"Susan!" Miles howled.

"Good old Right-and-Proper Miles Cavanaugh." Susan shoved him away and started walking again.

Miles grabbed her. "That is the damndest thing I've ever heard! What do you want, a note from Jack

saying I don't *have* to marry you? Then will you marry me?"

"No. I want proof. I won't marry a martyr!"

"God Almighty!" Miles roared. "You are the most perverse creature I have ever met!" He wrapped his arms around her, pressing their bodies together, letting her feel how much he wanted her. "I want you."

She looked up at him, her expression mulish.

"All right, damn it," Miles said. "You want proof, I'll give you proof!"

He hauled her farther up the beach away from the water then stripped off his shirt. Then his hands went to the zipper of his shorts. He skimmed it down and let the shorts drop.

"Miles!" Susan was aghast. "What are you doing?"

"Proving it!" His fingers slipped beneath the elastic of his briefs and he peeled them down.

"Miles!" Susan started laughing, shocked, stunned and—finally—believing. Miles reached for her, tugging her cotton top over her head and bearing her backward onto the sand. "Miles, you idiot! You'll get us arrested!"

"Do you believe me?" he demanded. He was undoing the snap of her jeans, his hands making her

warm and weak. He loomed over her, tense, his expression barely visible in the dark. But she could feel the question in his body. Her hands stroked down his bare back.

She raised her hand and touched his cheek. "I believe you."

A few blocks down the beach the headlights of the lifeguard truck began to move their way.

"Miles!"

"Will you marry me?" he persisted.

"I think I'd better," she said, rolling out from beneath him, laughing as she tossed him his shorts. "To save you from a life in jail!"

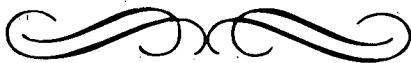
Miles grinned, pulling on his shorts, then toppled Susan back over in the sand and landed on top of her.

"I love you," he told her, framing her face with his hands. "You are the woman Jack told me I was waiting for." He kissed her hard, and if she had any lingering doubts about whether this man was cut out for marriage, they evaporated in the flames of his desire.

"I love you, too," she told him.

Miles said, grinning, "The Lord works in mysterious ways."

Susan laughed and slipped her arms around his neck, drawing him down to her and wrapping him in her love. "Amen," she said.



GINNA GRAY

A native Houstonian, Ginna Gray admits that, since childhood, she has been a compulsive reader as well as a head-in-the-clouds dreamer. Long accustomed to expressing her creativity in tangible ways, such as painting and needlework, Ginna finally decided to try putting her fantasies and wild imaginings on paper. The result? The mother of two now spends eight hours a day as a full-time writer. Be sure to look for the continuation of her popular Silhouette Spécial Edition series, The Blaines and McCalls of Crockett, Texas, in early 1999.



The Courtship of Dani


Danielle Edwards was a beautiful, successful businesswoman.

Yet at age twenty-eight, she had never had a love affair.

But Jason St. Clair, a success in his own right, decided to change all that—with the kind of no-holds-barred romantic pursuit that no woman could resist....



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The woman stood in the shadows of the alcove, partially concealed behind a large potted plant.

Why the devil is she hiding?

The question flickered through Jason St. Clair's mind for the tenth time in as many minutes, for her actions piqued his curiosity almost as much as her beauty aroused his more basic instincts.

The party was in full swing. Frank and Eloise Manders's River Oaks home was filled with Houston's most prominent citizens but from the corner of his eye he kept a close watch on the luscious brunette.

Who was she? His host had introduced her earlier as "Danielle," as though he should recognize the name. But he didn't. Could she be Frank's daughter? Or his daughter-in-law?

Jason frowned and swirled his glass of straight bourbon. God, he hoped not. He hated to think of that gorgeous creature tied to a weak-kneed hanger-on like Lewis Manders. His father was okay. Otherwise Jason wouldn't be using the man's consulting firm to revamp his new company. But Frank's worthless son was another matter.

Linda curled her hand around Jason's arm, her red-enameled nails flexing against his sleeve. She gave him her most seductive smile, but Jason felt not even a spark of excitement.

"Isn't it a lovely party, darling?" Linda purred.

Jason uttered a noncommittal "hmmm," and for an instant his eyes met those of the brunette in the alcove, but she looked away quickly, taking a sip from her glass. Jason smiled. Even from this distance he could make out the vivid blue of her eyes. It was the first thing he had noticed about her. Those unbelievable sapphire eyes, creamy skin and that lustrous dark brown hair had damn near taken his breath away.

FORMIDABLE. Yes, that was it, Danielle decided, if one had to sum up Jason St. Clair in one word. The man exuded an aura of raw power, both mental and physical, from here.

Dani reminded herself that she should be over there finding out all she could about the man. Experience had taught her that before beginning a job it was best to get to know her clients, and that was why Frank had given this party—so Dani and her team could meet Mr. St. Clair and the executives of his newly acquired company.

Instead, here she was lurking behind a potted palm. All because Lewis Manders persisted in his idiotic pursuit of her.

Dani's soft mouth twisted with disgust. The man had the sensitivity of an earth-moving machine. Com-

plaining to Frank wouldn't do any good, she knew. More than likely, he had been encouraging Lewis, since she knew that he'd like nothing better than for her to marry his weak, ineffectual son.

Dani shuddered delicately. Heaven forbid!

Cautiously she scanned the room for Lewis's dark head. When she didn't spot him, she squared her shoulders and stepped out of the alcove.

Dani had taken no more than a half-dozen steps when a hand closed around her upper arm and she found herself looking into Frank's lean, shrewd face.

"Dani! Where in the world have you been?" he asked.

Dani gave him a long, ironic look. *I've been doing my damndest to stay out of your son's clutches*, her eyes telegraphed. But she said, "Why? Did you want me for something?"

As she had known he would, Frank dismissed her silent complaint from his mind at once. "You're supposed to be charming our guest of honor, and I haven't seen you go anywhere near the man all evening."

"As a matter of fact, I was just headed in that direction," Dani replied coolly.

"Good. Good. Come on then, I'll go with you."

As they neared their quarry, Jason St. Clair turned his head, and Dani felt a little jolt as his tobacco brown eyes slid over her in a slow, thorough inspection.

Refusing to be intimidated, she conducted an inspection of her own.

Up close, she was struck by his size and coloring. Jason St. Clair was a big man, tall and lean, tough looking. He wasn't at all handsome. His features were much too harsh for that—high sharp cheekbones, a bold hawkish nose, a mouth that was a thin straight line above a determined chin and thrusting jaw. But it was certainly a compelling face. Rugged and utterly masculine. The only soft thing about Jason St. Clair seemed to be his hair, which was a thick luxuriant pelt of pale blond, gilded gray at the temples. The man was definitely formidable.

"You work for Update, Inc.?" Jason asked, looking mildly astonished as Frank neatly retreated.

Dani hid her surprise at the question. Obviously Frank hadn't briefed him as well as she had thought. "Yes, I do. As a matter of fact—"

Her words came to an abrupt halt, and she jumped when an arm curved possessively around her waist.

"There you are, sweetheart," Lewis murmured in her ear. "I've been looking all over for you."

I'll just bet you have, you jerk, Dani thought nastily, darting a quick warning look up into Lewis's handsome face.

"Lewis, have you met Mr. St. Clair?" she asked through a stiff smile, while trying to pry his hand loose.

"Yes, we've met." Unperturbed, Lewis tightened his hold, extending his free hand. "Nice to see you again, Mr. St. Clair."

"Manders," he said with a curt nod, withdrawing his hand as soon as possible. His eyes dropped to the arm that encircled Dani's waist. Beside him, Linda Hastings looked delighted.

Disgust was written plainly on Jason's face, and seeing it, Dani silently cursed Lewis for putting her in this position in front of a client.

"Uh, Lewis...Mr. St. Clair and I were just about to discuss his new factory," Dani said pointedly.

"Aw, come on, babe, loosen up," he cajoled. "This is a party. You can't talk business all the time."

Lewis did not want to talk business at any time, if he could help it. He was a spoiled playboy.

Stifling her exasperation, Dani tried a different tack, tilting her head and smilingly cooly. "Lewis," she murmured seductively.

He took the bait instantly, leaned down and asked throatily, "Yeah, babe?"

"If you don't take your hands off me in the next five seconds, I'm going to put my heel through your instep," Dani whispered sweetly so only he could hear.

Lewis jerked back. Sheer disbelief marked his expression for a moment, but as she calmly lifted one foot and, still smiling, poised it over his polished shoe, he dropped his arm and stepped away.

Thank goodness, Dani thought, and turned back to resume her conversation, but Jason St. Clair slipped an arm around his blond companion and began to ease away.

"If you'll excuse us, Linda and I

are going to dance while the band is playing a slow number," he said, moving toward the open French doors.

They stepped out onto the patio, and Dani watched, dismayed, as Jason took Linda into his arms. Within seconds they were lost from view.

"Would you like to dance?"

Dani's eyes were blue frost when she turned them on Lewis. "No, I would not," she replied and walked away.

Only her strong sense of responsibility kept her from leaving the party. As head of the team of business consultants who would be revamping St. Clair's new company, she felt she should at least try to establish some sort of rapport with the man. With that in mind, Dani stationed herself by one of the patio doors. I'll give it another half hour, she thought, snagging a glass of champagne off a passing waiter's tray.

But over the next half hour Dani did not manage to get within ten feet of Jason St. Clair. Finally giving it up as a lost cause, she sought out Frank and Eloise and bid them good-night.

Fumbling through her evening bag for her keys, Dani did not see the man waiting by her car until she had almost reached it.

"Oh! For goodness' sake, Lewis! You scared me," she snapped. "What are you doing out here, anyway?"

Lewis edged closer. "I couldn't let you go home without telling you good-night properly, now could I?"

Dani started to step around him, but he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her close. "Now see here, Lewis!" she gasped. "What do you think—"

His mouth closed over hers, muffling her protest. Dani began to struggle, but he had her clamped tightly against his chest. His kiss was wet and sloppy, suffocating, his teeth nipping at her lips, his tongue pushing at her tightly clenched teeth.

Dani gagged. She strained against his hold, but he backed her up against the car and pressed his length against her, so that she didn't even have room to use her knee. But a snicker of female laughter made Lewis stiffen and pull away.

"Oh, please, Manders, don't let us interrupt your fun." Jason St. Clair's deep, sneering voice floated out of the darkness. "By all means, carry on. We were just leaving."

Pale and shaken, Dani leaned against the car and gasped for breath as Linda and Jason strolled by. For several seconds she stared after them in horror, her hand clamped over her mouth, but the sound of a car door slamming farther down the driveway brought her out of her stupor. She rounded on Lewis.

Dani advanced and jabbed at him with the narrow end of her gold clutch. "You sorry, worthless sleazeball!" she said. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Dani looked him up and down with disgust. "You're nothing but a weak, spineless parasite. Whatever gave you the

idea that I would be interested in you? You make me sick."

"You...you'd better be careful," Lewis blustered. "My father wouldn't like to hear you talking to me that way. You seem to forget that you're just the hired help," he sneered. "You can be replaced at any time."

Standing in the wedge of space between the door and the car, Dani said, "You can tell Frank that he can have my resignation any time he wants it."

Dani gave him a scornful look, put the car in gear and shot down the driveway, sending Lewis stumbling backward with a startled cry.

ON MONDAY morning when she and Frank were shown into Jason St. Clair's office, Dani was again struck by the aura of power the man radiated.

"Good morning," he said in a gravelly voice, and Dani felt a tiny frisson race up her arm as her small hand was engulfed in his large, surprisingly callused one.

"Have a seat," Jason said, motioning them to the leather chairs in front of his desk as he returned to his own. His dark gaze switched to Frank.

"I thought we were going to get started today," he said, the statement holding a touch of annoyance.

Startled, Frank blinked. "Why... why, we are."

"Then where is Edwards?"

"Edwards?" Frank's eyes sought

Dani in confusion. "Why...right here. Danielle—"

"Danielle?" Jason snapped the name out. "Are you trying to tell me that the Danny Edwards who is supposed to be in charge of revamping my factory is actually Danielle?"

"Yes, of course," Frank confirmed. "I told you that, I'm sure."

"If you had, we wouldn't be sitting here now. You told me Danny Edwards would be heading the team of consultants. I was expecting a man."

Frank chuckled. "Don't worry. Dani will do a good job for you."

"Dammit, Manders! I told you I wanted your best consultant. You've got one helluva nerve trying to palm off this woman on me."

"But Dani *is* my best consultant. She's the best in the business. Just check with—"

"Can it, Frank!" Jason cut in, his face stiff. "You honestly expect me to believe that?" His cold eyes flicked to Dani. "She's what? Twenty-two? Do you take me for a complete fool?"

"I'm twenty-eight, Mr. St. Clair." Dani was tired of them discussing her as though she weren't there.

Jason turned back to Frank. "Put someone else on this job, or the deal is off," he ordered curtly. "If you want to carry your son's girlfriend on your payroll, that's your business. But I will not have her in charge of this project. And that's final."

If she had not been so angry, Dani

would have laughed at Frank's predicament. The last thing he wanted was to admit that she wasn't romantically involved with his son.

"Never mind, Frank," she said quietly. "Mr. St. Clair has my references. All he has to do is check them out if he wants to know about me."

Dani pulled a sheet of paper from her briefcase and laid it on Jason's desk. Staring into his stony face, she said, "This is a copy of my résumé. I carry it with me for times when I run into people like you. If you read it, you'll see that I've been in the business for eight years. Also that I graduated from college at twenty with a master's degree in business, and have since earned a master's degree in computer science and a B.A. in electrical engineering."

Dani snapped her briefcase shut and rose. At the door she paused and looked back at her boss. "Either Bill or Roger can probably handle this job. Being male, I'm sure they'll suit Mr. St. Clair much better." Her glittering eyes flicked to the man behind the desk then returned to Frank. "I'll wait for you in the car."

WHEN DANI arrived home that evening the first thing she saw when she stepped off the elevator was Chad—propped against her door.

"Hi, sis."

"Hi, yourself. I wondered how long it would be before you showed up." She inserted her key and pushed the door open. "I returned

your call yesterday, but Dad said you were out," Dani continued.

"Yeah. I went up to Lake Conroe with some of the guys." He was now rummaging through the kitchen cabinets, pulling out bread and chips and anything else that caught his eye. "Got any peanut butter? I'm starved."

"Aren't you always?" Dani ruffled his curly brown hair then reached to pull out the enormous jar she kept just for him. "You must have a hollow leg."

He flashed her a grin. "I'm just a growing boy."

"God forbid," Dani muttered, surveying his gangly six-foot-two frame. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

Chad hitched himself onto a high bar stool and hooked his boot heels on the lower rung. He popped the tab off a soft-drink can and took a long swig. "Oh, I just wanted to borrow your wheels to drive up to Conroe, but I bummed a ride with Jerry," he replied.

"And to what do I owe this visit today?"

"Mmm, Mom's planning a family get-together next week," he said. "She wants you to come."

"She couldn't call me and ask herself?"

"She did, but she got your answering machine and hung up. You know how Mom is."

Dani was very much afraid that she did. Sophie Edwards talked daily to Charlene, Chad's twin, but she called Dani only when she had to. Dani tried to tell herself that it

was only natural to love your own child more than an adopted one, but it still hurt. "Well, tell her I'll be happy to come and I'll call her later in the week."

"Sure." Chad downed the last of his sandwich and the cola. "Well, I gotta run. Biology exam tomorrow."

Dani followed him. "You mean that's all you came by for?"

"Sure. Well, that is... You see, I'm broke, and I've got a date with this really great-looking chick—"

"How much do you need?" Dani asked wryly.

Chad grinned. "How much can you spare?"

She gave him thirty dollars, and he gave her a peck on the cheek.

When Dani closed the door behind him, there was a strange little ache in her chest. "Thanks, Chad. That was just what I needed to top off a perfectly rotten day," she murmured dejectedly as she wandered into the bedroom to change her clothes.

Lord, how she *hated* being dismissed. And all because of that spineless parasite, Lewis!

And Frank. By all means, she told herself, let's not forget *his* part in all this.

But at least today's fiasco accomplished one thing; she had gotten rid of Lewis.

"CALL HIM off," she'd said flatly as Frank slid behind the wheel of his Mercedes-Benz.

"Who?" he asked cautiously.

Dani slanted him a scornful look. "You know who. Lewis. Your precious son." Sheepishly, Frank looked away. "Listen to me, Frank, because I'm only going to say this once. Tell your son to leave me alone. Because if he doesn't, I'll be forced to find other employment."

"Dani, I—"

"I mean it, Frank. I won't be put through another embarrassing scene like the one I just endured. Just in case I'm not making myself clear, let me spell it out for you. I will *not* marry Lewis."

Frank's shoulders slumped. "Ah, Dani, why not? Would it really be so bad?"

"In a word—yes."

Remembering the defeated look on Frank's face, Dani's smile faded. She regretted having to squash his hopes so bluntly, but enough was enough.

At work Dani spent the rest of the week closeted with Roger Thurston while he brought her up-to-date on his current project. But still she seethed.

By Friday she was fed up and irritated with herself. When her dearest friend, Phil Lathrope, invited her to dinner, she reacted as though he'd thrown her a lifeline.

"I'd love to," she said, drawing a chuckle.

"Bad day, love?"

"Try bad week."

"Well, before you make any hasty decisions, I must warn you we'll be joining some friends."

"Fine. The more the merrier. I just want to relax."

"Great. I'll pick you up at eight."

Dani left the office early, allowing herself plenty of time to indulge in a long, hot soak, a shampoo and a fresh manicure. By the time she opened the door for Phil she was dressed in a stunning pale blue lace creation with long, fitted sleeves, a swirling calf-length skirt and no back. Diamond teardrops swung from her earlobes and her shining sable hair, held back on one side by a diamond clip, cascaded around her shoulders.

"As usual, you look gorgeous," Phil said.

"Thanks," Dani said.

During the drive downtown, she relaxed while Phil told her about an estate sale he had attended in England the week before. Idly, her eyes ran over his attractive profile and she wondered again why there had never been anything romantic between them. They had common interests and shared a deep affection, yet there was no spark; they were simply the best of friends.

"Who is it we're meeting?" Dani asked as they walked into the posh restaurant.

"My banker, Paul Haggerty, and his wife, and another couple whom I don't know."

"Oh, I know Mr. Haggerty." Dani smiled. "He was a client of mine."

Phil gave the maître d' the name of their party, and they followed him through the dining room to where the other two couples were already seated. When Dani and Phil reached

the table the men rose...and Dani's heart gave a little leap.

The tall, gray-haired man was Paul Haggerty, all right. The other was Jason St. Clair.

*

DANI'S FIRST reaction was to run for the nearest exit, but common sense returned.

"Ms. Edwards! What a nice surprise." Paul Haggerty pumped her hand. "It's good to see you again."

"It's nice to see you, too, Mr. Haggerty," Dani somehow managed, acutely aware of Jason's dark gaze.

"Linda and I have already met Danielle," he said smoothly, giving her a sardonic smile before shaking Phil's hand.

Dani's gaze went to the woman seated between Jason and Paul Haggerty, and her spirits dropped another notch. "Hello, Ms. Hastings," she said, mustering what she hoped was a pleasant smile.

The other woman merely nodded and looked away.

When they were all seated, Dani, to her dismay, found herself on Jason's right. They were so close she could feel the warmth of his body all along her side, could smell his cologne and his unique male scent.

Phil smiled at Linda and Jason. "So, how is it that you know Dani?" he asked them.

"We met at a party," Jason replied.

"Well, my boy, you ought to hire her to do the makeover on that fac-

tory you just bought," Paul put in. "It'll be making money hand over fist in no time if you do, I can personally guarantee it."

Dani slanted Jason a cool look, then turned to the older man. "Actually, Update is doing the revamping of Mr. St. Clair's company, Paul, but I'm not in charge of the project."

"Well, Frank Manders's outfit is good, but if I were you, Jason, I'd insist that he assign the project to Dani. She's the very best there is." Paul smiled proudly at her.

"Are you one of those... consultants that Jason hires?" Linda asked, managing to make it sound slightly disreputable.

"Actually, I'm a manager," Dani smiled. "Which means that I head up a team of consultants."

"Don't you have to be terribly brainy to do that?"

"It helps."

"I see." Linda gave her a pitying look. "But don't you find that men are rather put off by a woman who is so obviously intelligent? I mean, no man wants to marry a woman who is smarter than he is."

Dani tipped her head back and laughed, a soft, throaty sound that made Jason's eyes gleam appreciatively as they ran over the graceful arch of her throat. "You may be right. But since I'm not interested in getting married, it hardly matters."

"Oh, my dear. Surely you don't mean that," Marge Haggerty protested. "A lovely thing like you?"

"Marge is right, Dani," Paul de-

clared. "It would be a crime against nature."

While Dani tried to explain the merits of the single state to the older couple, the others remained silent. But throughout the meal Linda continued to make snide little digs at Dani. However, it was not Linda who got under Dani's skin but the large, silent man by her side.

An excellent combo was playing mellow music. When they had finished eating, Dani eagerly accepted Phil's invitation to dance, grateful for an excuse to escape Jason, if only for a few minutes.

"Now, would you mind telling me what's going on?" Phil asked.

Dani looked up, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, sweetheart. All evening you've been giving St. Clair your polite, deep-freeze treatment, and he's been looking at you the way a hungry tiger eyes a delectable morsel."

"Don't be silly. Jason St. Clair can barely tolerate me." She gave him an ironic smile. "When he found out that I was to head the consultant team, he insisted that Frank replace me."

"That was business, but believe me, the way he looks at you is strictly personal."

Dani's heart seemed to do a little dance against her ribs. "No. No, you're wrong," she denied stubbornly. "The man has barely spoken to me."

When the music ended they found themselves standing beside Paul and Marge, and the older man suggested

changing partners. Paul was a good dancer, and by the time the music came to a halt, Dani had dismissed Phil's ridiculous claim.

When she and Paul reached the table, Jason was standing beside her chair. "My turn, I think," he said in that deep gravelly voice.

Dancing with Jason was the last thing she wanted, but there was no tactful way to refuse.

The strange prickly sensation she had experienced all evening grew worse when he took her into his arms. Dani held her body stiffly and stared over his shoulder.

"Relax," Jason instructed. "I'm not going to bite you."

"I didn't think you were," Dani replied coolly.

Her hand was engulfed in his large one, and against her soft skin she could feel the hard, permanent calluses that ridged his palm and fingers, mute testimony to his early years of struggle. Dani had heard all the stories about how he had started a small construction company on a shoestring, worked right alongside his crew, building the company up, then selling it and buying another...and another...and another.

Yes, she thought, Jason St. Clair was a man who welcomed a challenge—a man driven to achieve—but who enjoyed the struggle as much as the success.

"Were you serious about not being interested in marriage?" Jason asked suddenly. "Or is that just bait to get a man interested?"

Surprise, then anger, rippled through Dani. "I don't indulge in

game playing, Mr. St. Clair. Anyway, men are not all that hard to attract. I simply don't want one."

"Why not?"

Because I don't trust close relationships. Dani shrugged. "Some people just aren't meant for marriage. I think I'm one of them," she said, and for a moment they danced in silence.

"You know, I'm beginning to think I was mistaken about you," Jason said finally. "I checked your references," he explained.

"Why?"

"Curiosity, mainly." He let that soak in. "Since you're here tonight with Lathrope, I assume your... relationship with Lewis Manders is not as serious as it appeared to be."

Dani's eyes grew glacial. "Lewis and I do not *have* a relationship," she informed him.

"That's not the impression I got last Saturday."

"What you saw was Lewis's clumsy attempts to curry favor with his father. Frank wants a daughter-in-law who can take over the company when he retires, and Lewis is willing to go along."

"And you're not interested?"

"Hardly."

"How about Lathrope?"

Dani stared at him. "Phil and I are very good friends, in the truest sense of the word, but I fail to see how that is any of your business."

Jason smiled. "Before I ask you to have dinner with me, I want to be sure I'm not stepping on anyone's toes."

Sheer astonishment widened

Dani's eyes. "Why would you want to have dinner with me?"

Jason laughed aloud. "I should think that would be obvious," he said. "You're a very lovely woman."

Dani searched his lean, weathered face. What was he up to? She didn't believe for one minute that he was really interested in her as a woman.

"What about Miss Hastings?" Dani asked.

"I've made no commitment to Linda," Jason replied. "My obligation to her extends no further than this evening." He waited. "So... will you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

"No."

"Would you care to tell me why?"

"Because I don't want to."

Jason shook his head. "You really don't play games, do you?"

"No, I don't." Especially not risky games, Dani added silently as she met his rueful look. And she knew that involvement with Jason would be a risk.

They danced in silence. Jason studied her intently, while Dani once again stared over his shoulder with studied indifference. Finally the music stopped, and without a word she pulled out of his arms and walked back to the table.

Beneath the pale bushy brows Jason's eyes narrowed and focused on her bare back. He wanted her. More than he had ever wanted any woman before. And he'd be damned if he was going to let her just walk away from him.

ON MONDAY morning, Dani sat in Frank's office, staring at him in astonishment across his desk.

"B-but wh— Why would he do that?"

Frank shrugged. "Who knows? The point is, St. Clair wants you put back in charge of the project."

"But Roger was looking forward to—"

"Roger is not the issue here," Frank said. "Jason wants you."

The words sent a tingle across Dani's skin, but she took herself in hand. This was about business. "Very well, Frank. I'll get right on it."

OVER THE NEXT few weeks, to Dani's secret chagrin, it was soon apparent that whatever attraction Jason had felt for her had fizzled practically overnight.

Once Dani and her crew got down to business, Jason's main and seemingly only concern was making the Stratter-Lite factory a profitable enterprise.

He made it a point to keep up with the progress on the project, and with their connecting offices, Dani saw him several times a day. Once Jason took Dani to lunch, and occasionally she caught him watching her with that warm look in his eyes. But he was never more than polite and friendly.

When he flew to the east coast on business, three weeks after the project started, Dani ignored the empty feeling in her chest and concentrated even harder on her work.

"Burning the midnight oil again?" Jason's assistant, Arthur Fields, asked one Friday evening when he poked his head into her office to say good-night.

Dani looked up and smiled. "Yes. I have a little more to get done before the weekend."

Arthur's gaze went to the window. It was dark outside, and everyone else had left. "You want me to stay and wait for you? I hate to leave you here alone."

"No, no. You go ahead. I'll be perfectly safe with a guard at the gate."

"Well, okay. If you say so," Arthur agreed. "But I'll stop and tell him you're still here. Good night, Dani. See you Monday."

She was still poring over one report half an hour later when a harsh male voice made her jump.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the beautiful and brilliant Ms. Edwards still hard at it. What are you doing, Dani, trying to impress my old man?" Lewis drawled hatefully from the doorway. "It won't do you any good, you know. If you want the company, you have to take me with it."

"What are you doing here, Lewis? How did you get in?" Dani demanded.

"I told the guard that I work for Update," he said. "My old man is mad as hell at me right now and it's all your fault," he spat at her, though his speech was slurred. "Where the hell do you get off turning me down? You're a little nobody. The daughter of a plumber,

for God's sake! You ought to be flattered that I'd even consider marrying you."

Dani's eyes appraised him. He was leaning heavily against the doorjamb, one hand in his pocket, the other propped on his hip, thrusting back his suit coat. His tie was askew, his shirt wrinkled. Dani sighed wearily. Lewis Manders was hard to take at any time. Drunk, he was next to impossible.

Dani stood slowly. "This is pointless, Lewis. Why don't you go home and sleep it off?"

"Oh, no. I'm not going anywhere." He lurched away from the door. "Not until I show you what you're turning down."

"Don't be ridiculous. This is...Lewis!" He had rounded the desk and grabbed her upper arms, snatching her against him. "Stop...oh, good grief! Lewis!"

His hands were hurting her and he reeked of whiskey. Dani tried to evade his seeking mouth, but Lewis ignored her struggles. Finally she kicked him. Hard.

Lewis yelped in pain. As he bent over, Dani stepped back and quickly put the chair between them. "Now, Lewis, this has gone far enough."

SOMEONE IS still here, Jason thought as he parked his Jaguar and glanced up at the lighted window on the third floor. His face brightened as he realized that the light was coming from Dani's office.

Dani. How many times these past five days had he thought of her? A

hundred? A thousand? The truth was, she had never been out of his thoughts.

She fascinated him. Heart-stoppingly beautiful, she was one of the smartest people he had ever known, and sexy as all hell. He wanted her. Yet there was more to it than that, which was why he'd changed his tactics so abruptly.

His original plan for a quick seduction followed by a leisurely affair had been replaced with a more cautious approach. The last thing he wanted was to scare her away. *Or to hurt her*, a small voice whispered.

Inside, Jason punched the button for the elevator, but when the doors failed to open immediately he started up the stairs. As he rounded the landing between the second and third floors he heard Dani's voice. Something in her tone made him clear the final flight of stairs in three giant leaps and sprint down the hall, his heart pounding.

He came to a skidding halt in the open doorway of Dani's office just as she broke free of Lewis Manders.

"Touch her again, Manders, and you'll regret it for the rest of your days. I guarantee it."

Jason crossed the room and slipped an arm around her waist. When she slumped against him he pulled her close, his dark eyes on Lewis.

"Get out, Manders, while you still can."

"This is none of your concern, St. Clair. We—"

"I said out."

The curt command penetrated

Lewis's alcohol-clouded brain, but as his gaze slid over Dani, a sneer curved his mouth. "Oh, I see. It's like that, is it? Little Dani has found herself a bigger catch."

"Manders—"

"All right, all right. I'm going."

"And, Lewis," Jason's voice was low and menacing, "I'm warning you. If you ever touch Dani again, I'll break every small, vital bone in your body."

SHE TREMBLED within his embrace and Jason's arms tightened around her. "He's gone now, Dani," he said. She felt so soft in his arms, so delicately made, so warm. So right.

At last Dani stirred, though she made no effort to pull away. He tipped her head up and she met his inquiring gaze hesitantly. "Okay now?" he asked.

Dani nodded then looked down. "I...I'm fine, really. He didn't hurt me."

The quiet stretched out like a tightly strung wire. Something vibrated in the air between them. Something irresistible. They stared at one another in the quivering silence, then slowly, Jason's head lowered and Dani's tilted up. Lids drifted shut. Lips parted and met.

It was exquisite, soft and warm, a tender melding that sent emotion flooding through them. But soon it was simply not enough. The smoldering passion burst into flame.

With a groan Jason deepened the kiss, taking it into shattering intimacy. His arms tightened around

her and one large hand roamed her back and hips, stroking, kneading her flesh through the fragile batiste blouse. The other hand tunneled into her hair and cupped the back of her head, pulling her against his mouth.

Dani responded with a low moan of her own and clamped her arms around his waist, pressing closer. She melted against him, her soft curves flowing against his taut frame. The kiss grew reckless. Dani clung to him while her tongue matched his, stroke for stroke, touch for touch.

Jason slid his hand up her rib cage, the heel of his palm against the side of her breast. Slowly he moved his hand in tiny circles, massaging the soft, yielding flesh with a sensuous rhythm. Dani's shiver of ecstasy produced an answering one in Jason.

They were gasping for breath when Jason tore his mouth from hers and pressed his face into the side of her neck. The sweet scent of her perfume filled his nostrils. *I can take her now*, he thought as he felt the heat and the need in her. *In a few minutes I could have her naked in my arms on that sofa, willing and wanting.*

But even as the words formed in his mind, he knew that he wouldn't. *Dammit, St. Clair! What the hell's the matter with you? You caught her at a vulnerable moment. Sure, you can take her, but if you do you won't be any better than that piece of scum, Lewis.*

Tenderness and regret mingled in his expression as he eased her away

and smiled down into her flushed face. Slowly Dani's heavy lids lifted, and the glazed look of passion in her blue eyes took his breath away....

"I think we'd better get you home before I get carried away," Jason said.

And before Dani knew what hit her, he had hustled her down the hall and into the elevator.

The drive to Dani's apartment was strained. She felt like such a fool. He had merely tried to comfort her. Even that kiss, at first, had just been a friendly gesture. Then, like a love-starved idiot, she had taken fire in his arms. What normal, red-blooded male wouldn't have responded?

Remembering that kiss and the sensations it evoked, Dani felt a delicious shiver ripple through her. No man had ever affected her like that before. It was beautiful...and exciting...and terrifying, because she simply didn't have the experience to handle a man like Jason.

When they reached her building Jason insisted on walking Dani to her door. He studied her intently. "Are you really okay? You look pale."

"I'm fine," she assured him, then looked away. "Well, good night, Jason. And thank you for coming to my rescue."

"Any time." He cupped the side of her face. "I'll have your car delivered first thing in the morning." He smiled and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "Good night, Dani."

When he had gone Dani stepped

inside, closed and locked the door behind her and leaned back against it. Her face was solemn, her eyes wistful. She felt strange—achy and unsettled—and she had to battle against an inexplicable urge to cry. Part of it, she knew, was a reaction to that distasteful scene with Lewis. But what really disturbed her was her own wanton response to Jason. Dani had a horrible feeling that she was falling in love with him.

*

AFTER A NIGHT in which Jason St. Clair dominated her dreams, Dani woke with a pounding head, determined to put him out of her mind.

A call to the security guard revealed that, as Jason had promised, her car was back in the garage; so she soon set out on a round of Saturday errands. At the supermarket, she restocked the pantry and refrigerator for Mrs. Halloway, her housekeeper.

It was raining when she arrived home late in the afternoon. After shampooing her hair and soaking in a jasmine-scented bath, she pulled on a lilac velour robe and headed for her study.

For over an hour Dani struggled with the reports on Stratter-Lite, but she couldn't seem to concentrate. Finally she curled up on the couch to watch a movie on television.

An hour later the doorbell rang. With an impatient sigh Dani turned off the sound on the TV, and stomped to the door.

Her heart began to pound franti-

cally at the sight of Jason standing there, and she forced her gaze upward to meet his.

"Hello, Jason," she managed in a husky voice.

"Hi. May I come in?"

"Oh. Of course." Dani stepped back to let him pass then closed the door behind him. "Uh...won't you come into the living room?"

Jason's intent gaze was fixed on her face. After a moment he nodded, following without a word.

Dani sat down on the couch, and Jason sat beside her. He turned sideways, laying one arm along the back and bringing his crooked knee up on the cushion. Then suddenly he looked over at the silent action on the television screen. "You were watching a movie. Say, that's one of my favorites. Mind if I watch it with you?"

Taken completely by surprise, Dani blurted out a quick, "No. No, of course not." She turned up the volume on the remote control.

For the next hour she stared at the flickering images as though her eyes were glued to the set, but nothing registered. She was aware of Jason with every fiber of her being, and dozens of questions buzzed in her brain. *Why is he here? Surely he has better things to do on a Saturday night? Is he interested in me romantically? No, of course not.*

At the sound of his voice, Dani jumped and looked at him, her eyes wide and startled. "What?"

"I said, that was a great movie." He smiled.

"Oh, yes. It certainly was," she agreed in a rush.

Jason put his arms over his head and stretched hugely then looked at her. "Have you eaten?"

"No." Dani swallowed hard.

"Well, I'd suggest that we go out to dinner, but since it's raining and—" he drew a finger down the smooth velour that covered her arm—"you seem to have gotten comfortable for the evening, how about we call out for something?"

Dani hesitated, then said, "I would offer to cook dinner but the best I can do is warm up a casserole. I'm afraid I'm not very good in the kitchen."

"You mean there's something you can't do?" There was a teasing warmth in his dark eyes.

She shrugged. "My mother didn't see any need to teach me domestic skills. Luckily I have a housekeeper who cleans and keeps the freezer stocked with casseroles and other simple dishes I can microwave."

"As it happens, I have a fondness for casseroles."

Mrs. Halloway's chicken-and-broccoli casserole was delicious as usual, and Dani's lettuce-and-tomato salad at least edible. During the meal, Jason told her of his early struggles, little anecdotes about some of the funny things that had happened. But excitement and wariness warred within Dani, and with every passing minute her replies grew shorter, until finally he quit trying to draw her out. By the time they had tidied the kitchen, neither

of them had said a word for several minutes.

"Is something wrong, Dani?" Jason asked.

"Wrong? Of course not." She went to sidestep him. "Would you like some coffee?"

Jason's hands clamped around her upper arms. "No," he murmured huskily as he pulled her closer. "All I want is you."

Jason's lips settled on hers with possessive sureness as he drew her tightly to him. The sane part of Dani's brain urged her to resist, but it was too late. Jason deepened the kiss, and the sensual awareness that had vibrated between them all evening exploded into passion at the first evocative thrust of his tongue.

With an inarticulate little sound Dani gave in to her desire and ran her hands up his massive chest and around his neck as the kiss went on and on.

It was reckless and wild and dangerous. On some level, Dani knew it, but she could not stop.

Suddenly Jason tore his mouth from hers. His breathing was labored, a harsh rasp in her ear. "I want you, Dani."

She was a quivering flame in his arms, her silence all the answer Jason needed. He swept her up into his arms, and strode toward her bedroom.

There, he set her on her feet and pulled her into his embrace, kissing her deeply, slowly. Then he pulled back, and dark eyes locked with blue ones as he found the zipper at the front of her robe and eased it off

her shoulders. The robe collapsed in a soft, sensuous heap.

"Lovely," he said in a low, rasping whisper. "So lovely."

His eyes were hot, his face flushed and rigid with desire, and suddenly panic began to well up inside Dani. Then Jason's mouth was on hers again, and every coherent thought was driven from her mind.

She was vaguely aware of being eased back onto the bed, of Jason stretching out beside her. Then everything inside her went all hot and liquid as his callused hands stroked her bare flesh and he began to whisper incredible things in her ear.

With a low growl of frustration Jason rolled to his feet, shed his clothes and was then back beside her. She gasped when he pulled her close and her breasts encountered his warm, hair-covered chest.

He kissed her deeply, thoroughly, pressing her down into the pillow, and Dani could only cling to him.

A sigh escaped her as his mouth left hers and began stringing moist kisses and impassioned love words over her neck and collarbone and finally down into the valley between her breasts. He cupped a pearly globe in his rough palm, and as his mouth closed around its pink crest the sigh became a moan.

Ecstasy shot through Dani, and she writhed beneath him, her back arching. "Oh, Jason. Jason!"

"I know, love. I know." Jason raised his head and looked at her, his eyes burning. "Sweetheart, is it safe for you? Or do you want me to protect you?"

It took a moment for his words to penetrate the thick mists of passion that swirled around Dani but when they did an icy chill gripped her.

Jason felt her stiffen. "What's wrong, love?" he asked.

Ignoring his question, Dani scrambled for the edge of the bed, and Jason groaned. "Surely you're not going to stop now?"

Dani stood and snatched up her robe from the floor, zipping it securely up to her throat. She owed him an explanation. And then she had to get him out of there.

"That's exactly what I'm doing," she said. "This was all a mistake."

"Mistake!" Jason thundered. "You wanted me just as much as I wanted you."

"I shouldn't have let things get out of hand," she said as he lay there glowering at her, splendidly naked. Dani wished desperately that he would at least cover himself with something.

"Are you trying to tell me that you're not protected? If that's all that's bothering you, you can quit worrying. I'll take care of it."

When he moved as though to climb from the bed, Dani took a hasty step backward. "No. No, you don't understand." The words tumbled out until pride came to her rescue and Dani met his eyes squarely. In a calm, controlled voice, she said, "I'm not protected because I've never had to be. Ever."

"But...why? How? You're... how old did you say?"

"Twenty-eight," Dani snapped icily. "And what has that to do with

it? I wasn't aware there was a legal age limit on virginity. It's my body and my decision and absolutely none of your business."

For a moment Jason seemed incapable of speech. He just stared at her.

"And for heaven's sake! Will you put something on!" she snapped.

A ghost of a smile played around Jason's mouth as he reached down and pulled the corner of the bedspread across his lap. "Okay, Dani," he rasped. "Why don't you go into the living room and wait while I get dressed?"

Dani marched out without a word. She was standing by the French doors to the balcony when Jason emerged, her eyes fixed vacantly on the stormy night.

He stopped just behind her, not touching, but she could feel the heat from his body all across her back.

"I take it that you've never been in love, or had a serious relationship?"

Silence greeted the question.

"Why, Dani?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Dani, we have to talk."

"No, we do not. Look, it was a mistake. Now will you please leave?"

"Sweetheart." Jason laughed shortly and shook his head. "I promise you I have no intention of forgetting what happened between us."

Dani turned to face him. "You'll have to, I'm afraid," she said. "Because I'm simply not cut out for an affair."

Jason's eyes narrowed on her face, and after a moment he smiled. Reaching out, he ran a rough finger down her cheek. "We'll just have to see, won't we?"

He plucked his jacket from the chair, slung it over his shoulder and headed for the door. "Good night, Dani."

THERE WERE roses on Monday morning.

Dani walked into her office at Stratter-Lite to find a bouquet on the corner of her desk. Wide-eyed, she stared at it, a painful tightness squeezing her chest.

They were beautiful—long-stemmed deep red beauties whose sweet fragrance filled the room. There were dozens of them, in an exquisite cream porcelain vase banded in gold. Gently, Dani touched a soft petal. Never before in her life had she received a bouquet of flowers. The card was signed simply "Jason."

"I hope you like them."

At the sound of Jason's voice Dani spun around. He was standing in the doorway between their offices, a slight smile curving his mouth.

"I, uh...yes. Yes, they're lovely. Thank you, Jason."

"You're welcome." Sliding his hands into his pockets, he strolled toward her to stop only inches away.

"But...why did you send me flowers?"

"Oh, the usual reasons." Jason smiled and touched her cheek.

"You're a beautiful woman, and I'm attracted to you." His fingers slid up and toyed with the hair at her temple. "Very attracted to you," he added in a rough whisper.

Staring up into the intent tobacco brown eyes Dani felt her skin pop out in goose bumps and her insides liquify. He wanted her. And Dani wanted him, too.

"I meant what I said the other night, Jason." Dani's voice had a slight quaver. "I'm not cut out for an affair."

Jason looked at her for a long moment, then bent and brushed her lips with his. Dani felt the gentle caress all the way to her toes as he pulled back, smiling tenderly. "I know. After thinking it over the other night, I realized you were right."

Dani stared at him. "You did?"

"Yes. And now that we've got that cleared up, would you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Dinner?" Dani repeated. "Jason, I don't understand any of this. The flowers. Dinner. If you don't want an affair, then why are you doing this?"

Jason tipped his head back and laughed. "Oh, Dani, sweetheart. The trouble with you is you don't even realize when you're being courted."

Still shaking his head, he started for his office, then turned. "I've made reservations for eight so I'll pick you up at seven-thirty. Wear something sexy," he added.

Then he was gone.

Stunned, Dani stood perfectly still.

Courted. But didn't that mean...marriage? Her heart began to thud in earnest at the thought.

IT WAS SOMETHING she asked herself over and over in the days that followed. For, to her utter astonishment and secret delight, Jason proceeded to court her with all the gallantry of an age long past.

He took her dining and dancing, to plays, concerts, the opera. They went to art exhibits, museums, the planetarium, all the interesting places, which typically, as a Houston native, Dani rarely thought of visiting.

Jason was not inhibited about publicly showing his feelings, and word of their budding relationship spread through the Stratter-Lite offices like wildfire.

They were together almost every night. When they weren't, he always called her, and they talked of everything and anything, both behaving like teenagers. Finally, Dani was experiencing the giddy delight of first love.

It was a marvelous, magical time for Dani. She felt cherished and adored, her lovelorn soul soaking up all the attention Jason lavished on her.

Jason was such a big, rugged man, so tough in business that he surprised her with his tenderness and sensitivity, his capacity for affection.

At night when they parted he held her in his arms and kissed her pas-

sionately, but always with a rigid control.

Dani was flattered and grateful...and thoroughly frustrated. She was still trying to figure out exactly what it was he wanted from her. She was even prepared, now, to consider an affair.

JASON CLOSED his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. As he slowly released it, a great shudder rippled through him.

"No." The word was forced out. "No affair."

Dani stared up at him, pain and confusion on her face. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she fought the urge to cry. After a moment she managed a faint, "I see."

"No, I don't think you do," Jason said with just a trace of amusement.

Dani stepped back and reluctantly met his eyes. "My mistake. I...I thought you still wanted me."

"Of course I still want you, you little fool," he growled lovingly. "But I want much more than an affair." Smiling, he rubbed his nose against hers. "You, my love, will be a virgin on your wedding night. And—" he paused "—you will spend it with me."

Dani's heart gave a tremendous leap. *Jason wants to marry me.* The thought was so stunning she could barely take it in.

"Jason," she began shakily, but he pressed a finger over her mouth.

"No, don't say anything yet." Jason framed her face between his big

hands. "I want you to think it over very carefully, Dani. Because I want a total commitment—kids, a home, the whole thing. And I want it for keeps. With you."

He gave her a soft kiss, sliding his tongue along her parted lips then slowly dipping into the sweet warmth of her mouth just once before pulling back. "I have to go to New York in the morning," he whispered. "We'll go out to dinner when I get back Saturday. Will you give me your answer then?"

Too dazed to speak, Dani just nodded slowly.

*

I DIDN'T KNOW it was possible to be this happy.

The thought drifted through Dani's mind two weeks later as she stood beside Jason, observing the throng of gaily dressed people that filled the sprawling living room of his penthouse apartment.

She had accepted his proposal, and the days since had passed in a blur of sheer joy. Even at work she had been aware of the sweet, tight feeling of pleasure in her chest.

Dani smiled now as she watched Jason's mother circulating among the guests. Alice St. Clair was a little fireball. Like her son, once set on a course of action, she was practically unstoppable.

As soon as Alice had learned of their marriage plans she had insisted on giving them an engagement party. Since Jason had been all for a quick wedding, she had come bus-

ting into town from Arizona the very next day with her patient, long-suffering husband in tow.

Looking at Alice now, calm and regal in her mauve gown, her salt-and-pepper hair in an elegant chignon, no one would ever recognize her as the small dervish who had been whirling through this apartment for the past two weeks, ordering flowers and cases of champagne, taking care of a hundred and one details.

As he talked to Clyde Chapin, the president of one of Houston's largest banks, Jason held Dani close against his side. Not really listening, she leaned against him and let her gaze move slowly around the room.

The guests were a mixture of family, friends and business associates. All the top people from Strat-Lite were there, along with Jason's personal staff and key personnel from his other holdings. Frank and Eloise Manders were also in attendance, though Lewis was nowhere to be seen.

Her smile blossomed once again when she spied her parents, deep in conversation with Edward St. Clair. Dani knew that Sophie and Joe were uncomfortable at a party like this, and she silently blessed Jason's father for looking after them.

As Jason and Dani moved toward the next group of guests he murmured, "Will you be all right on your own for a few minutes, darling? Mother is giving me the high sign, so I'd better go see why."

"Of course," Dani said, laughing.

Jason gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Be right back."

Dani watched him go with shining eyes. When he and Alice disappeared into the kitchen, she turned to join the nearest group of people. But at the last moment she veered toward the terrace doors and stepped outside, closing them behind her.

Moving into the shadows, she went to stand by the retaining wall and gazed dreamily out at the city.

The June night was warm and humid, surrounding her like softest silk. Scattered about the terrace were redwood tubs filled with blooming gardenias. Dani inhaled deeply and smiled. She felt totally at peace and wildly excited at the same time.

The sound of footsteps drew her out of her reverie, and Dani saw two men strolling toward her from the opposite end of the terrace. At the French doors they stopped.

"Jason has got to be the luckiest son of a gun there is. Wouldn't you know he'd find someone like Danielle Edwards. He always said that the woman who had his children would have to be not only beautiful, but bright, too."

"Yeah, well, you know Jason," his companion chuckled. "Nothing but the best.' You didn't think he'd settle for an ordinary wife who'd give him ordinary kids?"

Dani moved farther into the shadows.

"Hardly. I'm just amazed that he found someone like Danielle. Hell, with looks like that, I wouldn't care if she had only two brain cells, but I've heard she's bloody brilliant."

As they stepped back into the apartment Dani closed her eyes. So that was it. She was to be a broodmare and provide him with beautiful, intelligent children to inherit his empire.

Oh, you poor, simple fool. You should have known. Why did you let your emotions blind you?

But Dani knew why. She had wanted so badly to love and be loved. To belong.

A burst of laughter broke from her, a bitter, choked sound that ended in a sob. Dani fought the tears. She couldn't cry. Not now. She had to think.

Marriage was out of the question now. Even loving Jason as she did, she couldn't bear to be just a means to an end. *A broodmare*. The apt description darted through Dani's mind again.

"So this is where you ran off to. I've been looking all over for you, darling."

Dani jumped and opened her eyes at the sound of Jason's voice. She stood perfectly still as he took her hands and squeezed them tightly. They were cold as ice within his warm grasp. In the shadows his smile was a flash of white, his hair like moonglow. "It's time to make the announcement, sweetheart," he said. "Are you ready?"

Dani's heart was breaking into a million tiny pieces, but she looked back at him calmly. "No," she said softly.

His smile faded. "What's the matter? Nervous?"

"I mean, no, there will be no announcement."

"What? But sweetheart, this party..."

"I'm sorry. I've changed my mind, Jason. I've decided that I don't want to get married after all."

"What?"

This time the word was a low, incredulous sound.

"Dammit, Dani! We love each other! You can't do this!"

"Jason, please. My mind is made up." She pulled her hands from his and stepped back. "Since we obviously want different things, I think we should stop seeing each other. I'll finish the work, but when it's done I think we should say goodbye."

Jason closed his eyes and rubbed them, exhaling a long sigh. "Dani, we have to talk," he said. "I know your feelings haven't changed in fifteen minutes. And for Pete's sake! We've got over a hundred guests in there. This is insane!"

"I'm sorry. I know this is awkward but it can't be helped now. I'll go call a cab."

"Don't be absurd!" Jason snapped, grabbing her arm.

His voice was hard and raw edged, and Dani knew he was fighting for control. But she could not relent. "Let me go, Jason. I'm going home."

Jason's nostrils flared, and finally he spat out a vicious curse and grabbed her elbow. "All right. But you damned well won't call a taxi. I'll take you."

She was relieved when, instead of

parking in the underground garage, he pulled into the circular drive at the front of her building. Dani opened the door partway, then paused and looked at his harsh profile with pain and longing. "Please tell your parents goodbye for me," she said. "And tell your mother that I'm sorry about the party."

Jason's head snapped around and his dark eyes bore into her. "This isn't the end of it, Dani. I know that you love me. And so help me, I'm going to find out what went wrong. You can bank on it."

JASON'S FACE was dark as a thundercloud when he stalked into his office on Monday morning. After spending most of Saturday night trying to explain the unexplainable to both his and Dani's parents and all day Sunday vainly wracking his brain for an answer to the puzzle, the last thing he had needed was that frantic call from his man on the east coast. "This is one helluva time to have to make a trip," he snarled.

Not that his being here was accomplishing anything. He'd called Dani repeatedly yesterday, but she wasn't answering her phone. Jason leveled a baleful glare on the door that connected with her office.

A faint rustle of movement from beyond it caught his ear, and his drumming fingers stilled. His eyes narrowed.

"Oh, what the hell!" The chair went zooming back as he lunged out of it. He crossed the room in three long strides, then quietly opened the door.

Relief flooded him when he saw Dani sitting at her desk, engrossed in the documents before her. "Good morning," he said.

The quiet greeting brought her head up, and as her long lashes lifted Jason sucked in his breath audibly.

Dani's sable tresses were put up in a Gibson-girl knot, framing her beautiful face beguilingly. She wore a Victorian blouse with a deep, ruffled lace yoke, leg-of-mutton sleeves and a high stand-up collar. It was an utterly feminine garment.

"Good morning," she replied quietly.

Dear Lord, she's lovely, Jason thought as he gazed at her. And by heaven, she's mine.

He pushed away from the door and crossed to her desk. Taking her by surprise, he cupped her chin, tilted her head back, and kissed her.

It was a searing kiss—hot, demanding, filled with passion and possessiveness. The blazing heat of it sizzled between them. His mobile lips moved over hers, devouring their softness, while his tongue plundered the sweetness of her mouth with sure, erotic thrusts. A helpless little moan flowed from Dani's throat, and Jason's hold on her tightened.

He lifted his head just far enough to stare into her eyes. "Don't you ever again try telling me that you don't love me," he ordered. "Not when you kiss me like that."

Straightening, he watched her intently and touched the silky curl at her temple. His smile was slow and filled with hard satisfaction, and

when she shivered delicately it grew wider. "I have to leave for the east coast in a few minutes. But I'll be back in about a week, and then you and I are going to talk this out."

Dani opened her mouth to argue, but he stopped her with another hard, devastating kiss.

Then he was walking away, and Dani stared after him, thoroughly shaken. Why couldn't he just let her go?

WORK WAS not a panacea, but it did help Dani to push her worries about the coming confrontation to the back of her mind. She also knew that the sooner they finished the better it would be for her. She needed to put space and time between her and Jason.

Dani worked unstintingly alongside the other Update people, and when they left for the day she went on alone. On Thursday Bob Loman came down with the flu and had to go home, so Dani doubled her efforts. That night she worked until midnight and was back on Friday before seven. Saturday and Sunday she worked at home.

A throbbing head and a scratchy throat greeted Dani when she awoke Monday morning, but she ignored both. By late afternoon, however, her temperature began to soar and she succumbed, giving in without even a token protest when her team suggested that she leave.

So woozy she could barely hold her head up, Dani drove home with the car windows down, greedily soaking up the blistering June heat, but she still shook so her teeth were

chattering. She stepped out of her shoes in the entryway and staggered toward her bedroom, peeling off her clothes as she went. Shivering uncontrollably, she unearthed a flannel granny nightgown from her dresser, slipped it on and crawled into bed.

But she could not get comfortable. She ached all over and she couldn't seem to get warm.

What followed was the worst night of Dani's life. Every half hour or so her stomach tried to turn itself wrong side out, and she alternated between hanging weakly over the commode and lying curled up in a ball, shivering beneath a mound of blankets.

Tuesday night was a repeat of the one before, and by dawn she was so weak and dispirited she gave in to a bout of weeping. That wore her out so much she finally drifted off into a restless sleep.

BARELY SPARING his secretary a nod and a quick "good morning," Jason marched into his office like a man with a purpose. Cursing vividly when he found Dani's office empty, he retraced his steps.

"Find Ms. Edwards. I want to see her right away," he instructed his secretary.

"Oh, but she isn't here. She's been out with the flu since Monday."

"Dani is ill? How ill?"

"Well, I... That is... I really don't know."

"You mean no one has even called to check on her?"

"Well, yes...but she doesn't an-

swer her phone," the woman replied. "I think it's unplugged."

With long, angry strides, Jason headed for the door.

A THUNDEROUS pounding on the front door woke her. Dani dragged her weak, aching body out of bed and groped to the door, weaving unsteadily. "Oh, Lord, please stop that banging," she pleaded. Every thud was hitting her skull like a hammer blow.

Just as she reached the foyer the pounding stopped, but then Jason called out, "Dani, open this damned door!"

"Go away," she croaked. "I don't want to see you."

"Dani, so help me, if you don't open this door—"

His fist struck the wood panel three times in rapid succession. "Go away," she repeated hoarsely.

"Dani, I'm warning you!"

Jason threatened, cajoled and pleaded, but she refused to answer, and after a while he stopped. When she heard the distant ping of the elevator, she looked through the peephole. The hall was empty.

Since she was already up, Dani used the bathroom, then wet a washcloth to lay against her forehead. Her throat was parched but she allowed herself only one sip of water.

Dani was halfway across the bedroom when she heard the sound of a key in the front door and froze. Jason's voice floated back to her.

"Oh, no. He got the building super to let him in!"

Dani looked down at her crumpled flannel gown and groaned. She

didn't want to see Jason at all. Especially looking as she did. Her complexion was a ghastly gray, her runny nose was red and swollen, her eyes were watery and her hair was a tangled, oily mess.

The soft thud of the door being shut jerked Dani out of her stupor, and with a little squeak she dove into the bed and stuck her head under the pillow, pulling the covers over.

After a moment the mattress tilted as Jason sat on the edge of the bed. The cover was pulled down to her waist. "Come on, honey. It won't do you any good to hide under there."

"Go away," Dani insisted.

"Don't be silly, love. Come on out," he coaxed. "I need to see just how hick you are."

His face wore a look of concern and his gravelly voice was amazingly soft and tender, but when he tried to feel her forehead she batted his hand away. "Go away! Leave me alone!" she cried.

"There now, honey. Don't get yourself upset," Jason crooned.

Dani's defenses crumbled. "Stop it! Stop it!" she cried, raining weak ineffectual blows across his chest and shoulders. "Just cut out the act! You don't love me. You only want to marry me because I'm intelligent and attractive. I know that now."

"Hey, hey. What is this?" Jason captured her flailing hands, pinning them to the bed. "What are you talking about?"

"You're just like all the others," Dani accused him. "My natural mother, my adoptive parents, Chad,

Frank Manders—they all just wanted to use me."

Puzzled, Jason frowned. "Use you? How?"

"Frank wanted me to marry his weak-kneed son so there would be someone to run his business when he retired. Chad butters me up so that I will continue to finance his education."

"And the others?"

Dani laughed weakly. "Ah, yes, the others. My mother used me to hold on to my father when their marriage was failing. Then, after he died in a car crash, she could hardly wait to dump me." At Jason's blank look Dani smiled starkly. "My mother gave me away. Signed adoption papers and took off like a shot."

"My God."

Jason's face paled but Dani pretended not to notice. "Sophie and Joe adopted me almost at once, and at first they seemed delighted. But they didn't really want me. I was merely their catalyst. Once they had children of their own I was shoved into the background."

Dani looked at Jason resentfully, her blue eyes blazing as she spewed out all her pent-up hurt and resentment. "And you? You want only the best, don't you, Jason? The mother of your children has to be able to give you heirs who are not only beautiful, but bright enough to hold on to all you've accumulated. Isn't that right?"

Releasing her hands, Jason stared at her for a moment. Then to Dani's astonishment he roared with laughter.

"Oh, sweetheart, you're not nearly as bright as I thought if you really believe that I want you only because you're beautiful and brainy," he choked. "Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

Dani shot him a resentful look, then lowered her eyes sullenly. "I'm sick," she muttered.

"I know, sweetheart," he said tenderly, cupping her chin until she met his caressing gaze. "And you look wretched, but right at this moment I love you as much as it is humanly possible for a man to love a woman."

Dani stared at him, her expression faintly shocked. "I don't believe you," she said.

"You will," Jason pronounced. "But we'll straighten that out later. For now we need to concentrate on getting you well."

THE NEXT MORNING when she awoke her temperature was normal and the nausea was completely gone. She was still weak as a kitten but feeling well enough to be uncomfortably aware of her grubby state.

Jason ran a warm bath, then carried her into the bathroom and set her down beside the tub. When he started to unbutton her gown she stopped him, giving him an indignant look that made him laugh. "Okay, okay," he desisted, "but remember, the door stays open and I'll be right outside. If I hear any loud thumps or even long silences I'll be back."

At first all he heard was gentle splashing, but when the sound of

spraying water followed, he called, "Dani, what are you doing?"

"Don't worry. I'm still sitting down. I'm just rinsing with the hand-held shower."

"Oh." But a few minutes later, the sound of water gurgling down the drain was followed by a loud thump and a splash. "What the devil are—"

He bit off the question then poked his head around the door and saw Dani struggling to climb out of the tub. Muttering darkly, he grasped her under the arms and plucked her out.

"Jason!" she shrieked, trying desperately to cover herself. But it wasn't her body that drew his attention. It was her wet tendrils of hair.

"Dammit! You washed your hair," he accused. "Now you'll probably get pneumonia."

"Will, you please get out of here!"

The shrill pitch of Dani's voice finally penetrated Jason's rage, and for the first time he noticed her futile, frantic little attempts to protect her modesty, and his face softened. Still holding her by the shoulders, he stepped back to take in every dip and curve of her slender body. "Oh, love, you're so beautiful," he murmured. "And anyway, in a couple of weeks you'll be my wife, so there's no reason to be so skittish." Gently, he wrapped a towel around her.

"I broke our engagement, remember?" she said, but her voice lacked conviction and she knew it. He seemed so sure of himself and his ability to convince her of his

love. And she was halfway convinced already. Surely a man wouldn't play nursemaid to a woman if he didn't love her.

"As soon as you're well enough we'll have a quiet wedding, with just our families there," he said as he dried her, blithely ignoring her statement.

Then, to Dani's utter astonishment, he carried her back to bed and proceeded to dry her hair.

It was an exquisitely intimate experience. There was something both touching and sexy about having this large, rugged man tend to her in such a personal way.

"Oh, Jason, that feels so good," she murmured sleepily as he lifted and stroked and smoothed her hair. She was asleep before Jason could turn off the dryer.

He smiled down at her tranquil face and gently tucked the covers up around her chin. After placing a soft kiss on her forehead, he quietly left the room.

Then he went straight to Dani's desk, flipped her address book open to the E's, picked up the phone and punched out Joe and Sophie's number. When Sophie answered he said, "Mrs. Edwards, this is Jason St. Clair. I think we need to have a talk."

DANI SLEPT peacefully until noon. When she awoke, Sophie and Joe were sitting beside her bed.

She blinked. "What are you two doing here?"

"And where else would we be when our daughter's sick?" Sophie chided gently.

"Your mother's right," Joe said. "You should have called us."

There was hurt and sadness in their eyes, and seeing it, Dani said, "He told you, didn't he?"

"Yes. Everything." There was a moment of charged silence, then Sophie squeezed Dani's hand. "Oh, Dani, love, we're so sorry. We never meant to hurt you. When Jason told us how you felt, we were shocked. Sweetheart, we had no idea that you felt this way."

Dani pressed her lips together to stop their trembling, but she didn't look up.

"We do love you, Dani," her mother said. "We always have. When we adopted you we thought we were the luckiest people in the world."

"But...well...it soon became obvious that you were a very special child. You were more than just beautiful. You were brilliant. And...well, I guess that sort of intimidated us."

Dani flashed her a hurt look and Sophie's brow furrowed. "Oh, darling, try to understand," she pleaded. "Joe and I are just ordinary people. We felt inadequate. You were so smart and composed and self-sufficient. You never made demands, never asked for help. You just quietly went your own way, and it seemed to us that there was nothing we could give you."

"If we gave Chad and Charlene more attention than you it was because they demanded it. Those little devils have never been shy about letting you know what they want and expect. You know that. Why,

just look at how demanding Chad is with you. He knows darn well that you love him, and the feeling is mutual, which is why he takes it so for granted."

Dani looked faintly surprised as she digested that, but then her face grew solemn again. "And what about Charlene? I can't believe that there is any love there. She can barely stand me, and you know it."

Sophie sighed, but it was Joe who spoke. "That's just jealousy. Pure and simple jealousy," he said, and shook his head. The look he exchanged with Sophie held sadness and shame.

Lifting Dani's hand, Sophie placed it against her cheek. "We tiptoed around you because we didn't quite know what to do with you, but we loved you every bit as much as we loved the twins, Dani. And we've never stopped. I swear it," she added quietly.

Tears welled up in Dani's eyes. She fought to hold them in check but it was impossible, and when she finally looked up at her parents they trickled over and ran down her cheeks. "I...I love you, too," she said.

With a little cry, Sophie sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled Dani into her arms. Holding her tightly, Sophie rocked her gently and cried, too.

And then Joe was there, holding them both, and his own tears added to the flow. They clung to one another, each reaching out, striving to heal the hurt long years of misunderstanding had wrought.

Hours later, when Sophie and Joe

had left, Jason appeared in the doorway. "Mad?"

A warm smile slowly curved Dani's mouth. "No. I'm too grateful to be angry."

"Are you ready to talk about us now?"

"Yes, I think I am," she managed in a voice that quivered ever so slightly.

Smiling, Jason came and sat down on the edge of the bed. He braced an arm on either side of her head and looked directly into her eyes. "Since this seems to be a day for clearing up misconceptions let me make it clear that the *only* reason I want to marry you is because I love you," he stated.

Dani's heart kicked into high gear but she didn't make a sound.

"I'll admit that, yes, I admire that sharp brain of yours, and yes, I think you're gorgeous and sexy as hell, but those are only two of the things that make you *you*. I also love you because you're gentle and caring, and fun to be with. I want to hold you in my arms and protect you from anything that might hurt you. And I'll love you just as much when you've lost all your teeth and your hair has turned silver."

Dani was looking up at him with wide, wondering eyes, and Jason leaned down to place a soft kiss against her parted lips. "Believe that, sweetheart."

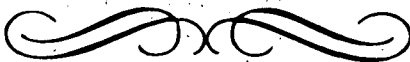
"You'll catch the flu," Dani whispered hoarsely.

"It'll be worth it." He caressed her cheeks with the backs of his knuckles and gazed deep into her eyes. "I love you, Danielle Ed-

wards, with every cell in my body. And all I want from you is your love, and your promise to be my wife."

Dani could hardly believe it. Suddenly her heart was so full she thought it would burst, and for the second time that afternoon, tears of

happiness filled her lovely blue eyes. "I love you, too, Jason," she said softly. One by one, the tears spilled over and trickled down her cheeks as she lifted a hand and tenderly cupped his jaw. "And I want more than anything to be your wife."



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DALLAS SCHULZE



USA Today bestselling author Dallas Schulze is a full-time writer—with over forty contemporary and historical novels to her credit—who lives in Southern California. To indulge her love of the American West, Dallas is a docent at a local museum dedicated to the period. In what little spare time she has, she enjoys doll collecting, old radio shows, classic and current movies. Several of Dallas's novels have been finalists in the RITA awards for outstanding romance fiction.

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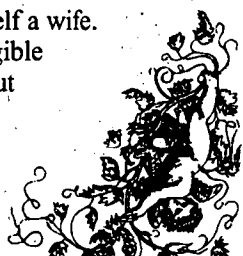

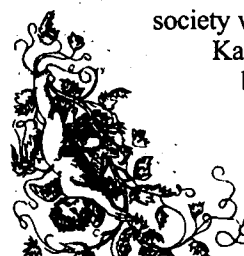


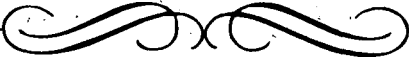
Saturday's Child

Quentin Sterling had returned to San Francisco from his Wyoming ranch to attend his sister's society wedding—but also to find himself a wife.

Katie McBride was the most ineligible bride for a man of his wealth, but

Quentin never was one to follow convention.





Lying in bed, Katie McBride stared up at the dark ceiling, waiting. She'd been waiting for over an hour now, and the church bells had long since tolled midnight. In respectable neighborhoods, people were abed, sleeping peacefully. But respectable was not a word for San Francisco's Barbary Coast.

Here, the hours of darkness brought peak business for the areas' gambling halls, saloons and bordellos. The Barbary Coast never slept. An hour's sleep would cost an hour's profit.

Profit was not on Katie's mind. For her, money was survival—and maybe, someday, a way out of this shabby room in its tumbledown neighborhood.

Katie had spent all her nineteen years moving from place to place. Her parents, Sean and Maggie McBride, had come from Ireland, determined to make a better life.

The theater was in their blood. They'd brought their infant son with them; and a few years later, Katie had been born during a brief stop in Cleveland.

The McBrides had dreamed of founding a new theatrical dynasty, and Katie had been on the stage before she could walk. Later, she'd danced and sung in theaters from Boston to Los Angeles. Once she'd even had a role in a Broadway play with Ethel Barrymore.

Her older brother, Colin, had left the family act almost three years ago, tired of the endless wandering. Liking San Francisco, he'd settled there.

Katie had stayed with her parents until their deaths eight months earlier in New York City. They'd been crossing the street in front of their hotel when an automobile careened around the corner at high speed—nearly thirty miles an hour, one witness had guessed.

The impact had killed them both and orphaned Katie. But Colin had sent for her and she'd come across the country to join him.

On the journey, she'd tried not to hope for too much. Colin had said little of his life in his few letters. Still, Katie had allowed herself to dream—just a little.

A small house maybe—nothing fancy—just a cottage where she could grow a rose or two. They'd rented a house one summer in Connecticut and she'd never forgotten the scent of the roses that grew over the porch.

But there was no cottage. There was just this one room, with a bathroom down the hall and one window that looked out on a shabby street.

When Katie arrived, Colin had taken a job as a dealer in a saloon on the Barbary Coast. It was no job for a man of his talents, but it put food on the table. It hadn't taken

Katie long to see the necessity of finding work herself. But her future didn't lie in the theater. She was tired of the tawdry trappings and the only certainty in life being uncertainty. She wanted a home and a family, a place to put down roots.

She turned over and stared at the ceiling again. Nearly 3:00 a.m. and Colin still wasn't home. Not that he hadn't worked this late before, but it never failed to worry her.

But what if something had happened to him?

Her eyes flew open and she stared at the ceiling, waiting, listening.

KATIE STARTED UP in bed at the sound of footsteps in the hallway.

"Katie?" Her brother's soft voice followed on the sound of a key in the lock and then the creak of the door. "Katie, I've brought a man who's hurt."

Katie swung her legs off the narrow bed, reaching for her light flannel wrapper and buttoning the collar high on her throat.

She brushed aside the curtain that separated her bed from the rest of the room, blinking in the sudden light as Colin lit the lamp, then staring at the stranger who stood near the door.

He was taller than Colin. His shoulders were broad, filling out his formal black jacket. His hair was golden brown, his features perhaps too strong to be considered handsome, but compelling all the same.

But it was his eyes that threatened to steal her breath away. They were

deep blue in color, not like a summer sky but more like a sapphire she'd seen once.

Katie flushed as those eyes swept over her thinly clad figure, a spark in them that told her he liked what he'd seen.

"I'm sorry to intrude on you in this boorish manner, ma'am. I'm afraid your brother overestimates the extent of my injury." He swept a battered silk hat from his head and bowed.

Katie's eyes found the dark stain on his sleeve and she hurried forward.

"Help the gentleman to a seat, Colin, and let me take a look at that arm."

Colin eased the stranger to a chair, then stepped back and watched as Katie knelt in front of him.

"Colin, get me some water in a bowl and bring my sewing basket." With a quick movement, she split the coat sleeve up the side, exposing the white silk of his shirt. Gently she eased the fabric away from the deep slash in his upper arm.

Studying the wound, Katie tried not to notice the muscles that rippled under the golden skin she'd bared, more muscles than seemed right for a man who wore silk hats and expensively tailored evening clothes.

"It should have a stitch or two to make sure that it heals properly. If you'll trust me, I'll see to it."

She was sponging the blood from around the wound as she spoke. When the stranger didn't say any-

thing, she reluctantly shifted her eyes to his face. He was looking at her hair, which spilled in fiery array across her shoulders.

"Your hair is the most beautiful color I've ever seen, though I'm sure you think it forward of me to mention it."

Katie's cheeks flushed. "I do," she said bluntly. "Will you be wanting me to tend to your arm or not?"

He shifted his gaze from her hair to her face. "Yes, please." He said it softly, sweetly, like a child requesting a treat. Hastily, Katie bent her head over her sewing box.

"You must hold still. 'Tis likely to hurt a bit," she warned him as she motioned Colin to shift the light closer. Lifting the chimney off, she held the needle over the flame.

"I shall be steady as a rock. I do believe I have imbibed enough liquor this past night to prevent any but the greatest of pains from bothering me. Please, do not concern yourself."

True to his word, the stranger didn't flinch, and no one said a word until she'd set the last stitch and clipped the thread. She sat back on her heels.

"With a little care, you should do. 'Twould be best if you tried not to do any heavy lifting with that arm for a week or two."

The man turned to look at the neat row of stitches slashing across his tanned skin.

"You've done a fine job. And I thank you for it."

"It would be better thanks if

you'd stay out of dark alleys where trouble is likely to seek a man out."

"You're quite right. If it hadn't been for your brother, I've no doubt that I'd have been beyond patching. But I don't even know who I'm thanking."

Katie rose, stepping back as he stood up. Odd how he seemed to dominate the room.

"I'm Colin McBride and this is my sister, Katie," Colin said.

"Quentin Sterling at your service." The stranger bowed low. Katie dipped a small curtsy.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," she said politely.

He reached to pick up his hat, bowing again to Katie. "I thank you, ma'am, for your kindness and your skill with a needle."

Colin opened the door, leaving no time for Katie's response, if she'd had one. Quentin Sterling's eyes met hers for one long moment before he turned to step outside with her brother.

Katie stood staring at the blank panel, feeling slightly breathless. Then she turned back to the cubbyhole that sheltered her bed. She knew as well as Colin that she'd never see Mr. Quentin Sterling again, but would it hurt to dream a little of what it might be like to have a man like that fall in love with her?

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KATIE HURRIED across the street. It had to be nearly seven o'clock, and Mrs. Ferriweather believed in punc-

tuality the way others believed in the power of prayer.

Mrs. Ferriweather's establishment was much too elegant to be called a dress shop. She catered only to the finest clientele, turning lengths of silk and soft woollens into sophisticated gowns in the latest fashions.

For the past six months Katie had spent ten hours a day, six days a week plying her needle. The pay was nearly thirty-five dollars per month, and if she could take over Miss Lewis's position in the summer when she married... Well, maybe she and Colin could afford to rent a little house somewhere. A real home.

By noon, Katie's back ached. On one side of the room several sewing machines hummed as the girls worked the treadles. Sometimes Katie worked there, but her talent for fine embroidery meant that she mostly worked by hand.

Today, she was applying an elaborate design of soutache braid to a pale green jacket.

"Ladies, I have some wonderful news." Katie looked up as Mrs. Ferriweather stepped into the room, waiting until all eyes were on her.

"We have been asked to provide a seamstress to assist in preparation for one of the season's biggest weddings. Miss Ann Sterling is to wed Mr. Jonathon Drake in less than three weeks. It seems that the seamstress the Sterlings had hired has fallen and broken her wrist. Such a pity," she added dutifully.

Katie heard little beyond the name. Sterling. Was it possible that

they were any relation to *her* Quentin Sterling? Not that he was really hers, but she couldn't help feeling a bit possessive.

"Since we have provided several gowns to Mrs. Sterling and she has expressed her satisfaction with our work, she has made this request. Our work must be of the very highest quality, since providing even a part of the trousseau for Miss Sterling will be a feather in our cap."

She paused, beaming at her workers fondly. Katie hardly dared to breathe.

"It will certainly be a great deal of work, ladies. And long hours. Though much of the work will be done here in the shop, Mrs. Sterling wishes to have a seamstress in residence at her home. She's offered to provide a room."

Was it Katie's imagination or was Mrs. Ferriweather's eye lingering on her?

"Miss McBride?" Katie jumped at the sound of her name.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I believe you live with your brother, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do."

"Would he object to you taking such a position temporarily? It would mean a few additional dollars, of course, to compensate for the extra hours."

"No, ma'am." Despite the breathless feeling that threatened to overcome her, Katie's voice was steady.

It couldn't possibly be the same family. But if it was?

"MAYBE I SHOULDN'T have come home."

Tobias MacNamara looked up from the chessboard, focusing faded but still shrewd eyes on his grandson. Quentin was staring out the window at another foggy winter day.

"Why *did* you come home, boy?"

Quentin stirred restlessly. Why *had* he come home?

"I don't know." He moved a bishop.

"Must've had a reason, boy. You didn't come home for this shindig of your mother's." Tobias's contempt for the wedding preparations was clear.

"I thought the least I could do was return for my sister's wedding," Quentin said. "Besides, winter in Wyoming can be a bit harrowing. I decided I could use a break."

"A break, is it? Or did you want a taste of your old life again? Your sniveling wimp of a cousin couldn't wait to tell your mother all about your return to your wicked ways."

Quentin's smile held an edge. "It was quite a surprise to find Joseph across the table from me at the saloon."

"Do you still blame him for young Alice's death?" Tobias asked gruffly.

Quentin shot the old man a look. "I do not wish to discuss Alice."

"I know you don't. You haven't discussed her in eight years, not since she died. Well, time is supposed to heal all wounds and though I think Joseph Landers is a liar and

a cheat and probably not above murder, the girl's death wasn't his doing."

"Why are you defending Landers? As I recall, you've threatened more than once to forbid him ever to set foot in this house again."

"That I have. And if it hadn't been for your mother's weeping and carrying on, I'd have stuck by it. But that should be enough to convince you Alice's death wasn't his fault. You know how your mother felt about Alice and your engagement. The fact is, boy, there was nothing anyone could have done but what Landers did."

"He left her there alone," Quentin said.

"He went for help," Tobias corrected. "When she fell through the ice, he couldn't pull her up himself. That damned gown must have weighed fifty pounds and the ice was rotten. *You* couldn't have done anything but what he did."

Quentin stood up, the memories roiling inside him. He couldn't argue with his grandfather's words—or bring himself to agree with them. For so many years he'd focused his anger on Joseph Landers, who deserved it on a hundred other counts. He'd simply never let himself accept that, in this one instance, he might be innocent.

Because if Joseph wasn't to blame, he'd have to accept some of the responsibility for Alice's death himself. If he hadn't gone away... If they'd married as everyone had expected...

Quentin stared out at the wispy

fog that draped Nob Hill. He'd been in the Yukon when word of his fiancée's death had reached him. By the time he received the letter, she'd been dead and buried nearly a month.

Quentin had known Alice Mason since they were children. And he'd known they were going to marry since he was fifteen and she was twelve. They might have wed already but for the restlessness that stirred in him, the urge to see more of the world.

He turned from the window abruptly. "Maybe Alice's death wasn't Joseph's fault, but it must be the first time he's been blamed for something he *wasn't* guilty of."

"I'll not argue with that." Tobias leaned back in his chair. "You still haven't told me why you came home."

Quentin looked up from the fist-sized piece of gold ore he'd been studying. The first chunk of ore his grandfather had ever mined, taken from the Sutter's Mill strike back in '49 that had founded the family fortune.

"I've decided to marry."

Tobias said nothing for a moment, then responded, "Well, you're of an age for it. A man should have a wife and children. It steadies him, gives him a purpose in life. Who's the girl?"

"I don't know yet. I've come home to find a wife."

"Have you mentioned this to your mother?"

"No. I thought I'd wait until after Ann's wedding. Then maybe she'd

like to throw a few parties, introduce me to some eligible females. I've met few enough of those in my wanderings," he said.

Tobias fixed his gaze on Quentin. "Don't do it, boy. Don't say a word to your mother about this. You're not going to find a wife in this house."

Startled, Quentin crossed the room to lean his arms on the back of the richly upholstered wing chair. The chessboard lay forgotten between them.

"Why not? You mean Mother doesn't know any eligible females?"

"She knows plenty, depending on what you want them to be eligible for. The girls she'd introduce you to would know all about going to parties and running a big house with plenty of servants. Are you planning on that sort of life?"

"No, I'm going back to the ranch as soon as I've found a wife. I need a girl who can run a home five miles from the nearest neighbor."

"Well, you're not going to find a girl like that at any party your mother gives," Tobias told him bluntly.

Quentin sat down, hearing the truth of his grandfather's words. It had all seemed so simple back in Wyoming. Now he stared at Tobias in silence, seeing all his plans crumbling.

A soft tap on the door interrupted his thoughts. Tobias frowned.

"Nearly four o'clock and I always have my tea at three," he muttered. "I swear this household is

falling to pieces. Come in," he barked.

A maid entered bearing a heavy tray. "Your tea, sir."

"Where have you been, girl, dallying with one of the stable boys?" Tobias asked.

The tray hit the table with a little more force than was necessary. "I'm sorry if your tea is late."

"What happened to the girl who usually brings it?"

"Edith is polishing the silver, I believe."

Something about the sound of her voice tugged at Quentin's memory, but he could see little beyond a neat back wearing one of the gray gowns all the maids wore. Her hair was gathered in a heavy knot at the back of her head, though a few strands of dark auburn had slipped from beneath the plain cap she wore.

"You're new here, aren't you?" Tobias asked.

"Yes, sir. I'm the new seamstress, helping with the wedding."

"And a very fine seamstress, I'd say," Quentin said, suddenly placing the voice. He touched his shoulder.

Katie jumped. Hidden in the wing chair as he was, she hadn't even realized he was there.

She turned, feeling the color leave her face when Quentin stood up, a smile lighting his eyes. He was just as handsome as she remembered.

"I didn't think I'd see you again. What a coincidence."

"Yes, sir." She got the words out with difficulty as the color rushed back into her face.

"I was going to come back and thank you properly, you know," Quentin said. "But I couldn't find you once I'd sobered up." His smile was self-deprecating. "That will teach me to drink more than I should. I'd thought of going back to see your brother too, but I got the distinct impression he didn't approve of me."

"I'm sure that's not true," Katie mumbled, focusing on his neat cravat. In the two weeks since she'd been here, she'd heard mention of Mr. Quentin, but since their paths hadn't crossed, she'd begun to forget the reason she'd been so anxious to come here. Now she was tongue-tied.

"I must go," she muttered, and, bobbing a curtsy, she fled.

"What was that about?" Tobias demanded.

"Excuse me, Grandfather. I'll be right back." His departure was abrupt.

Katie was halfway down the hall when she heard him behind her.

"Miss McBride. Katie." She slowed, her eyes on the narrow flight of stairs that led to the upper floor and sanctuary.

She turned reluctantly.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Sterling?" She fixed her gaze on the top button of his coat.

"I thought you might like to know how your patient progressed," he said lightly.

"How is your arm?"

"Almost healed, thank you. But tell me, what are you doing here?"

"As I told Mr. MacNamara, your

mother wished to have a seamstress here full-time. She approached my employer, Mrs. Ferriweather, who sent me."

"Remind me to thank Mrs. Ferriweather."

Katie flushed, glancing over her shoulder as she heard the jangle of keys that announced the housekeeper's approach. Mrs. Dixon was not one to tolerate any conversation between servants and the family.

"I have to go."

She turned to hurry up the stairs. Quentin didn't try to call her back, aware of Mrs. Dixon's chilly gaze taking in the meeting from down the hall.

He turned away from the stairs. Odd that he should run into that girl here in his own home. She was just as pretty as he remembered, her hair just as rich a color. He wondered if it could possibly be as soft as it looked.

IT WAS ALMOST a relief when the last few days before the wedding swept the household up in a frenzy of activity. The huge house bustled with guests and servants, all intent on preparations.

At the last minute Mrs. Sterling decided that her daughter's wedding dress required more alterations. Whatever the reason, Katie was called on to do the work. Carrying the heavy gown upstairs, she muttered to herself, "It already looks like a Christmas tree. Maybe I should just put some candleholders on the shoulders so that Miss

Sterling can go to her groom all lit up like a holiday."

The image made her smile and she took the last few steps more quickly, coming to an abrupt halt as she stepped onto the landing and found herself face-to-face with Joseph Landers. Her smile faded, her hands tightening on the heavy gown.

He looked at her for a long, silent moment and then his tongue came out, flicking over his lips. "Well, it looks as if you've quite a lot to do," he said, his eyes lingering on her bosom.

"I've enough to keep me busy." Her tone was polite.

"You don't like me, do you, little Katie?"

"It isn't my place to have an opinion, Mr. Landers."

Disappointment flickered in his eyes and she knew that he'd have preferred a more fiery answer. The man actually found the idea that she detested him exciting.

"You like my dear cousin Quentin, don't you? You think he's a gentleman. Well, perhaps I'll have the chance to show you how much more interesting a real man can be."

Anger flared deep inside her, chasing caution away. She'd been working long hours with too little sleep.

"And where do you propose to find a real man to show me?" she spat.

It took a moment for the question to sink in. Joseph's face paled, then flushed red. He controlled himself with an effort. "You'll regret that, my girl. I'll show you exactly what

a real man does with impertinent servants. Soon, my girl."

She met his eyes bravely, and he brushed by her. She hurried into the sewing room, shutting the door and wishing that there was a key in the lock.

"You've made a mistake, Katie McBride," she whispered. "You've only sparked his interest."

*

BY THE DAY before the wedding, there was nothing to be done but row upon row of beading on the bodice of the gown. Katie applied herself to the task, hardly lifting her head.

The monotony of the stitching left too much time for thinking and she found her thoughts turning, as they did far too often, to Quentin Sterling.

"Yes, you *are* a fool, Katie McBride. Even setting aside that he's a Sterling—and wealthy in his own right, too—what would he see in you?"

The thought was surprisingly depressing, all the more so for having been said out loud. Maybe that was why she felt slightly lightheaded. Or perhaps it was that she hadn't eaten. She'd gone down to the kitchen for a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter that morning.

Edith, with whom she'd become friendly, had promised to bring her noon meal as soon as she could, but she was likely as busy as Katie. Not that she was hungry. But this odd, hollow feeling in her head might

have something to do with a lack of nourishment.

She heard the door open and, looking up, blinked to focus on her visitor, expecting Edith. But the figure in the doorway was much too large.

"Mr. Sterling." Her voice was hoarse.

"Hello, Katie. No, don't get up." She obeyed his command, uncertain that her legs would hold her.

"What are you doing here?" She realized how blunt the question sounded. "I mean, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing." He stepped into the room, leaving the door open for propriety. "The whole house seems to have gone mad with wedding preparations. I'm seeking a small sanctuary. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. But there aren't many places to sit."

"Don't worry about it. I've sat more these past few weeks than I have in years. I'm not accustomed to spending so much time in a sitting position, unless I'm on a horse. Do you ride, Katie?"

She thought of the one time she'd awkwardly ridden a horse about Central Park.

"I've ridden," she said cautiously.

"In Wyoming I spend most days in the saddle."

"You sound as if you miss it."

"I do. More than I'd thought possible." He crossed the small room to look out the window.

"Are you thinking of your ranch?" Katie's quiet question made

him realize he'd been standing there wrapped in thought.

He turned. "I do believe I've spent too much time alone. I've forgotten my manners. Yes, I was thinking of my ranch."

"Is Wyoming pretty?"

"No, I wouldn't call it that. Wild, exciting, stunning, perhaps, but not pretty. It's too big, too raw."

"And you love it for its wildness."

"Yes. I suppose I do. There's something exciting about a land that won't ever be tamed. It's a challenge."

"It seems to me that land is the one constant thing. The one thing you can depend on to always be there. A place you can sink roots and grow." She leaned her head back, her eyes dreamy. For the first time Quentin noticed her pallor, the dark circles under her eyes.

"You look as if you've not slept."

Katie shrugged. "I'll sleep tomorrow. There's still much to be done."

"And I'm keeping you from it."

"That's not what I meant."

"But it's the truth. I'll find somewhere else to hide from the turmoil. I thank you for the moment's respite."

Walking down the narrow flight of stairs, Quentin wondered just what had possessed him to seek out Katie McBride. If any of his family should discover it, they'd think he'd gone quite mad. Stepping into the second-floor hall, he nearly bumped into Edith.

"Mr. Sterling, sir." Edith bobbed a curtsy.

"Edith. Just the person I was looking for. I'd like you to have cook make up a tray—just some soup and bread. Oh, and one of the cherry tarts we had at lunch."

"Yes, sir. Do you want it brought to your room?"

"Take it up to Katie. I don't think she's bothered to eat today."

"No, she hasn't. I was going to take her something just as soon as I could."

"Well, do it now and tell anyone who argues that it's on my orders."

Quentin watched her hurry off before starting toward his grandfather's room.

"You're wise to keep the girl's strength up, cousin."

Quentin turned to look at Joseph, who slithered out of the reading alcove that had concealed him.

"I suggest you not say another word, lest I be forced to knock your teeth through the back of your head." Quentin's tone was quietly icy.

"There's no need to be so touchy, cousin," Joseph protested. "I'm not the sort to tell Aunt Sylvie what's going on under her nose. We men have to stick together. I only thought that you might consider sharing the bounty, keeping it in the family, as it were."

Quentin grabbed a fistful of his cousin's shirt, startling a cry from Joseph.

"You are to stay away from that girl. In fact, you are to stay away from every female in this household."

If I find that you have laid so much as a finger on anyone under this roof, I shall take great pleasure in tearing your sniveling head from your body."

WHEN THE WEDDING at last occurred, it seemed almost an anticlimax to all the preparations.

Katie heard the whole story from those servants who'd been allowed to stand in the back of the church. Miss Ann had been pretty as a picture and the clothes worn by the guests had proven the city's claim to being the Paris of the Pacific. All in all, it had been a dazzling spectacle.

Katie's fingers throbbed and her shoulders ached, but the job was done, and well done. Mrs. Ferriweather should be pleased.

She stretched, aware of a hollow emptiness in her stomach. Food suddenly seemed very appealing, but even more, she wanted to be out of this stuffy little room. If she hurried, she might make it home in time to see Colin before he left for the night.

Sliding off the bed, she shook out her dark skirts and put on her shoes. Shrugging, Katie lifted her coat from the chair. She could hear the sounds of laughter drifting up from the first floor.

Katie had no intention of lingering. All she wanted was home and food, in that order. She yawned again. And sleep. She felt as if she could sleep for a week, but Mrs. Ferriweather would be expecting her at the shop promptly at seven.

She started toward the door, only to fall back, startled, when it was pushed open.

"What a pleasant greeting, my dear. I wasn't expecting such a welcome." Joseph Landers stepped into the room, turning on the gas lamp she'd just shut off. Katie backed away, uneasy but not yet frightened.

"If you'll excuse me. I was just on my way out."

"But I won't excuse you." He said it pleasantly enough. "You and I have a bit of unfinished business, my dear. Now seems as good a time as any to finish it, don't you think?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She edged to one side, her eyes flickering to the door as Joseph pushed it closed.

"Just to insure that you don't make too hasty a departure. I want to be sure we have plenty of time."

"I think perhaps you've had too much to drink. If you'll just let me past, I'll say nothing of this." She was stalling for time.

"It doesn't matter. Who would believe you—a seamstress, a servant? And even if they believed you, who would care? Are you going to fight me?"

Katie felt her stomach roll. He'd enjoy subduing her. Perhaps, if she didn't struggle, he'd lose interest.

Yet, when he lunged suddenly, gripping her arm, her response was instinctive: her other hand slapped his face. He bit off a curse but only dragged her closer despite her struggles.

Three floors below, laughter and music floated upward, at odds with

the nearly silent struggle going on in the small room. Even if she'd had the breath to scream, Katie knew it would not be heard.

She dragged her nails down the side of his face, feeling a savage satisfaction at his howl of pain. But a moment later, he swung her around, catching her with an openhanded slap that made the world go gray.

Before she'd regained her spinning senses, he'd thrown her across the bed, pinning her down with the weight of his body, catching both her hands in one of his, stretching her arms over her head. Katie arched frantically, but couldn't throw him off.

"Now let's see how high and mighty you are."

Katie thought she'd never seen anything more evil than the set of his face. He hooked one hand in the high neckline of her dress, bruising her throat as he wrenched at the fabric until the buttons popped loose.

She lay beneath him, bare but for the fragile protection of her chemise. In an instant, that was gone too and he stared down at her naked breasts.

"Lovely," he murmured. "So pure." He lifted his head to meet her terrified eyes, closing his free hand over one delicate mound. "Am I the first? Of course I am," he answered, his eyes glittering with unholy lust. "I'll make sure that your first experience is a memorable one, little Katie."

The cruel sound of his laughter broke the frozen moment and Katie bucked frantically upward, crazed with the need to have him off her.

She knew that her struggles only excited him more but she couldn't stop.

Her frantic struggles seemed to amuse him for he laughed again, the sound drowning out the quiet click of the door opening and then closing, as footsteps hurried down the stairs.

"WELL, ANNIE HAD her big send-off and Sylvie got to put on her show. Now, maybe we can have a little peace in this house." Tobias lifted a forbidden glass of brandy, sipping it slowly.

Quentin lifted his own glass, settling back deeper into his chair. Two floors below, the guests were still celebrating.

Suddenly the door was thrust open and Edith tumbled in, her cap tilted over one eye.

"What the devil?" Quentin rose.

"What is it?"

"It's Katie, sir." She paused, trying to catch her breath. "It's that Mr. Landers. They were struggling. I came as quick as I could. I didn't know where else to go. Hurry, sir. Please hurry." But she was speaking to empty air.

Quentin took the narrow stairs three at a time. By the time he reached the door to the sewing room, he felt rage explode in his chest. His cousin's back was to him and for a moment, he thought he was too late, that Joseph had accomplished his foul aim. He lunged forward, grasping the other man's shoulder, tumbling him off the bed.

Relief surged through him. Though Katie's dress was torn, Joseph was still fully dressed.

He had only a glimpse of Katie, pulling together the front of her bodice, her face white. Then Joseph came up off the floor, aiming his fist at Quentin's jaw.

The fight moved onto the landing and Katie heard the harsh sound of a fist striking flesh, a solid thud and then silence. Looking at the doorway, she felt numb.

When Quentin stepped into the room, Edith behind him, she stared at them solemnly without saying a word.

"Are you hurt, Katie?"

"No, I don't think so. My dress is ruined, though, and I don't think I'll be able to mend these stockings." She turned her head.

Quentin reached out, snagging her cloak from where it had landed when Joseph ripped it from her. Edith took it from him, her eyes meeting his. She handed the wrap to Katie.

"Are you sure he didn't hurt you, Katie?" That was Edith, her voice gentle.

"Didn't I tell you I was fine?" Katie asked. "My garments have taken more damage than my person. Now I want to go home."

"Perhaps you should see a doctor," Edith said.

"I don't need a doctor. I just want to go home." Katie's voice rose.

"All right. We'll take you home," Quentin told her. "Edith, go and tell Graves to bring the car-

riage around to the side entrance. Say nothing to anyone about this."

Edith nodded and hurried from the room.

"Are you ready to go now?" Quentin asked.

"I've told you I'm fit," Katie said, but her legs didn't seem to have gotten the message. When she slid off the bed, her knees threatened to buckle. Her startled gasp brought Quentin to her side, offering support.

With Quentin's arms about her, now carrying her away from the scene of her terror, Katie felt almost safe. But deep inside, she thought she'd never feel truly safe again.

With a soft sigh, she turned her face against the fine wool of Quentin's dinner jacket, shivers racking her body as reaction set in at last.

The carriage was waiting at the side door. Quentin set Katie down. Her skin still carried the pallor of shock and there was a hollow look about her eyes, but she seemed more in control.

"I would appreciate the use of the carriage, but there's no need for you to come with me," Katie said.

"Edith and I are both coming with you," Quentin said firmly. "I'll get my coat and hat and tell my grandfather what's happened. I was with him when Edith came to get me," he said. "He'll want to know that you're safe."

When they arrived at the scarred door of her room, Katie's hand was shaking too much to fit the key into the lock. Quentin took it and unlocked the door.

"Katie!" Colin was home, still in his shirtsleeves. He started toward her, his smile of welcome fading when he saw that she wasn't alone. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really," Katie said quickly. "Just a small incident. Mr. Sterling was kind enough to insist on seeing me home."

But then her voice wavered, and she pressed her free hand against her mouth as Colin's figure blurred before her.

"Katie!" Colin reached out, drawing her close as a sob broke from her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Katie cry.

Feeling his strong arms around her, Katie's control dissolved and she sobbed into his shoulder, crying out all of the fear, the deep exhaustion of the past weeks. Then she drew back, wiping at her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

Edith bustled forward. "You need some rest, that's all. Let me help you."

Colin waited until the two women had disappeared behind the curtain that set Katie's bed off from the rest of the room before asking Quentin, "What happened?"

Quentin told him in as few words as possible.

"She wasn't hurt?"

"I believe her hurt was more emotional than physical," Quentin said.

"I should never have let her go out to work," Colin said angrily.

"And watch the two of you starve?" Edith stepped through the

curtain, her eyes flicking over Colin contemptuously.

"I beg your pardon?" Colin seemed confused.

"Well, it's plain to see that you don't hold with working. Just getting out of bed at this hour."

"As a matter of fact, I *have* just gotten out of bed." Colin's temper flared. "But, contrary to your opinion, Miss—"

Quentin broke in then. "I would guess that Miss McBride would sleep easier if it were a trifle quieter."

They glared at each other a moment longer before Edith gathered her wrap and swept by Colin. She paused at the door. "Sleep is the best thing for her now. Tell her I'll be by to see her tomorrow after I've left work."

QUENTIN WAS fastening his cuffs when someone knocked on the door of his room. Glancing up, he bade the person enter.

"I've just come to tidy your room, sir. If you'd prefer, I can come back later."

"No, this is fine. I was just leaving." It wasn't until he turned that he realized it was Edith. "Did you see Katie yesterday evening? Is she well?"

"Yes, sir. I saw her." Edith's eyes were lowered.

"And how is she? Is she rested?"

"A permanent rest is what she'll be getting," Edith said. "She was given her walking papers yesterday from her position at the shop."

"Where did you hear this?"

"From Katie herself. Mrs. Ferriweather has let her go. Seemed she regretted it, but after Katie had made improper advances to one of the wedding guests, she had no choice in the matter. So there's poor Katie, booted out of her job and no one to care about it."

"I care," Quentin said quietly. "Thank you for telling me this, Edith."

"Well, Katie wouldn't thank me for it."

"I thank you for it." Picking up his walking stick and hat, Quentin left the room.

"EXCUSE ME, Mother, but I fail to understand why you complained to Miss McBride's employer about her. Are you aware that she has been fired?"

"Really, Quentin, what her employer sees fit to do is none of my concern. I simply told her what had occurred."

Quentin sighed. Staring at his mother's vacant but still pretty face, he reminded himself that she was not an unkind woman. She just didn't believe in thinking—had, in fact, avoided it all her life.

"Mother, Joseph attacked Miss McBride. He could have done her great harm if I hadn't interfered."

"Joseph told me all about it. Naturally, I had to tell Mrs. Ferriweather. After all, I can't have that kind of thing going on in my house. All our girls are virtuous," she added firmly.

"Katie is virtuous," Quentin grated. "Did you forbid Joseph to return to this house?"

"Certainly not. The poor boy admitted that perhaps he'd been a trifle naughty but the girl enticed him, Quentin."

"Hellfire and damnation!" Quentin shot from his chair. "Katie would no more have tried to entice Joseph or any other man than...than you would," he said, striding to the door. "I'm sorry I didn't wring his worthless neck."

"Quentin." Sylvie Sterling's voice rang with alarm. "Quentin, where are you going?"

He turned, fixing her with cool blue eyes. "Did I tell you that I'd come to San Francisco looking for a wife?"

"A wife?" She stared at him. It was too incredible to imagine, but there was that look in his eyes. "A wife? Quentin. You're certainly not—You wouldn't?"

"Yes, Mother, I rather think I would." He grinned wolfishly as she fell back, one hand pressed to her bosom. He set his hat at a jaunty angle. "I think Katie McBride might be just the girl I'm looking for."

HE'D ONLY MEANT the words to startle his mother out of her smug complacency, but as he strode down the street, the idea seemed to grow in his mind.

Quentin didn't know a great deal about Katie McBride, but she seemed to be a girl of sound good

sense. She understood the value of hard work, and, heaven knew, ranch life provided plenty of that.

She was attractive and seemed intelligent. Knowing how isolated the ranch was, Quentin understood the importance of a woman he could talk to. His grandfather had been right in saying that he'd not find a suitable wife among the women of his own class. But Katie McBride was not ill-bred. In fact, she seemed more refined than some of his sister's flighty friends.

By the time he stopped outside the scarred door of the room Katie shared with her brother, he'd wavered from one side of the fence to the other. As he lifted his hand to knock, his nose wrinkled at the scent of onions that drifted down the hall.

He forgot about the onions when the door opened. Katie stood in front of him, her eyes widening with surprise when she saw him.

"Hello." He removed his hat, trying a smile on her.

"Hello, Mr. Sterling." Her eyes seemed to soften a bit, but she didn't move back from the door.

"How are you feeling?"

"I took no permanent harm. Thanks to you."

"May I come in?"

She hesitated a moment. "Colin isn't here."

"I promise to behave with the utmost propriety."

"I know you will. May I take your things?"

His hat and cane disposed of, Quentin was suddenly at a loss. Looking at Katie, all his indecision

faded. She'd make a fine wife, strong, hardworking, the sort of a woman to stand beside a man. It wouldn't be a love match, but then, since Alice there could be no question of that.

Katie wondered what had made him look so fierce all of a sudden. It had been quite a surprise to find him standing in the hallway. She'd not expected to see him again. Not after Mrs. Ferriweather had dismissed her because of his mother.

Oh, Mrs. Ferriweather had been apologetic. And Katie understood, but it didn't make her any less angry. It wasn't fair. But if she'd learned one thing in her twenty years, it was that life was seldom fair.

"May I offer you some tea?" she suggested at last.

"No, thank you," Quentin refused, guessing rightly that tea was a luxury here.

"Would you like to sit?" It was a relief when he nodded.

Looking at Katie, he was struck again by the restful air that seemed to drift about her. She sat, politely waiting for him to speak, her hands together in her lap. Her gown was not in the latest fashion, but it was of good quality. The pale green fabric set off the color of her hair so that it seemed to glow.

"Katie, would you like to see Wyoming?" He heard the question as if it were being asked by someone else.

"I beg your pardon?" She blinked.

"I've a ranch there," he told her.

"There's a house. Small, rather untidy, but there's a pump in the kitchen. Another room could be added.

"The house needs work—curtains, rugs, that sort of thing. I've lived alone too long. A woman's touch would add warmth.

"The land is hard but beautiful. There's snow in winter, but in the summer the grass stretches for miles. There's a small garden that could be made bigger. The facilities are primitive but I could install a water closet this summer."

He stopped, wondering what else he should say.

She stared at him uncertainly.

"Are you looking to hire a housekeeper, Mr. Sterling? For I'd have to say I think you could do better."

Quentin opened his mouth, shut it again and stared at her. "Actually, I was asking you to be my wife."

IN THE SILENCE that followed his words, Quentin could hear each separate beat of his heart. From the look on Katie's face, he could tell she was as stunned as if he'd suddenly sprouted horns.

"Did you say—" She was unable to finish the sentence.

"I want you to marry me."

"Why?" She looked at him, her eyes wide. "Why would you want to marry me?"

Quentin leaned forward.

"When I came home, it was not only for my sister's wedding. I'm nearly four-and-thirty, and I had it in mind to find a wife."

"Why me? Surely there are many more suitable choices."

"I think you are suitable."

"Your family is not likely to agree," she commented dryly.

"It's not my family who'd be marrying you. Katie, I need a woman who isn't afraid of hard work. The life I'm offering is not easy, but it can be rewarding."

Katie smoothed her skirt. She'd thought that the events of the past few days had left her numb, but just the sight of Quentin had made her pulse beat more quickly.

He'd haunted her thoughts, and if she was honest with herself, he already held a piece of her heart. If she married him, she didn't doubt that he'd soon hold it all. But to love someone who didn't love her...

"You don't speak of love," she said quietly.

"No, I don't." Quentin met her eyes squarely. "I'll not lie to you. I know women set great store by marrying for love. But it's my feeling that a marriage can be just as solid if it's based on mutual respect and friendship. And I think we've a bit of both, haven't we?"

Katie nodded. She wouldn't have called her feelings for him friendship but it was all she was likely to have. Could she marry him, knowing that?

"I still don't understand why you're marrying at all," she murmured.

"I need a wife. I've had the ranch nearly three years. I've built a strong foundation—cattle, horses and most of the feed to support them. But it's

a lonely life. A man begins to crave someone to talk to, someone to share the successes and the failures. I'm building something worth handing on to a son."

"Then it's a real marriage you have in mind," she said, the color rising in her cheeks.

"Yes. But I wouldn't rush you, Katie. I have to go back soon. There's no time for courting before I leave. But if you married me now, we could do the courting after the marriage. I'd give you time to get to know me, Katie. I'm a patient man."

She lifted her head, meeting his eyes directly. "What of your family?"

"They'll come around."

"You've more optimism than sense, if you don't mind my saying so," she commented.

"Perhaps. Is their reaction so important to you?"

"Not to me. But I know how it feels to lose a family. I'd not like to cause you to lose yours."

"You won't. It will be their choice if they can't accept our marriage."

"That's easy to say now."

"Let me worry about my family." Quentin reached out, catching her hands in his. "Katie, we could have a good life together. It's not an easy land, but it is beautiful. I'm offering you a home of your own, a place to put down roots."

She caught her breath. How had he known? How had he sensed her deepest need and spoken of it? A home. A place to call her own, a

place to build something permanent and lasting.

She stared at their linked hands. He didn't love her...might never love her. But he'd be a good husband, kind and true. And if she bore him strong sons— Well, wasn't there a kind of love in that?

And if she didn't take this chance, what did she have? She had no job, no reference for another employer.

"Yes." The word was hardly a whisper, but she felt Quentin's hands tighten. "Yes, I'll marry you."

*

Dear Katie,

I hope you are happy in your new home. San Francisco does not seem the same without you.

I was honored that you asked me to be at your wedding. Your brother, Colin, offered to walk me home afterward, and I was glad, for it gave me the opportunity to apologize for my earlier rudeness to him.

That awful night when Mr. Sterling and I brought you home, I made the assumption that your brother was unemployed and you the sole support.

Fortunately, Mr. McBride was quite gracious in forgiving me. I should have realized that your brother could not be other than as honest and hardworking as you are. Though my family

would not approve of his current employment.

Please write and tell me how you are going on. Wyoming seems so very far away. Do you miss our fair city?

Now that time has passed, I thought it might interest you to know that the Sterling household was in quite an uproar over your wedding to Mr. Sterling. Perhaps he's already told you about it.

His mother fainted dead away when he told her that he was planning to marry you, and his father turned quite purple. I happened to be nearby and heard the shouting match that ensued. But your Quentin stayed very cool and told his parents that their opinion held small interest for him. He said that he was marrying a fine woman and was proud that you'd consented to be his wife.

I see I've rattled on far too long, as usual. Please write soon and know that I miss you.

Your true friend,

Edith

Katie refolded the letter and slipped it back in the envelope. So Quentin's parents had been furious. She wasn't surprised, though he'd never breathed a word to her. But when they didn't attend the wedding of their only son, it was not hard to guess.

Quentin had defended her. It was a pleasant thought, for lately his

temper had been uncertain at best. She had a pretty good idea of what might be making him so testy but she didn't know what to do about it.

The memories of Joseph's attack had faded and Quentin now filled her thoughts. But how could she tell him? It would seem as if she were asking him to consummate their marriage, a bold move she couldn't bring herself to make.

She sighed, tucking the letter into a drawer, looking out the window. The last of the snow had melted, turning the yard into a sea of mud, but all she saw were rows of young plants, vegetables burgeoning with fruits and flowers turning bright faces to the sun.

It would take time to make the dream a reality but she'd made a start. Joe, the hired hand, had helped her to prepare the vegetable garden, and beside the front door she'd had him dig two holes for the American Beauty rosebushes, ordered from a catalog.

When Quentin had seen them, he'd shaken his head. "They're not likely to survive the first winter, Katie."

She had put up her chin. Roses by the door were a part of her dream. "Then I'll plant them again."

"It's your time," he'd said, shrugging. "We can give them *some* protection in the fall."

So she had her roses, her house and her garden. If she didn't have her husband, surely that would come in time.

Shaking her head, she knelt to open the bottom drawer of the

dresser, hoping to find room for a few small mementos, but it jammed on something inside. Katie worked her hand into the narrow opening and pressed down on the offending object, while she pulled the drawer open with the other hand.

The item that had caused the problem was a picture frame. Curious, she picked it up and turned it over.

A lovely young woman looked up at her. She had soft skin and wide-set eyes with a sweet expression. An inner beauty seemed to shine out of her.

Across the bottom of the picture was written "So you'll never forget. With love, your fiancée, Alice."

Katie sat on the floor staring at the picture. So Quentin had been engaged to this beautiful young woman. And he'd loved her. The thought made her heart ache.

"Katie?" Quentin's voice called. She scrambled to her feet, the picture still clutched in her hands.

"Katie?" Quentin stepped into the bedroom—the room he so rarely entered when she was present. "Could you—" He broke off when he saw her with the picture.

"What are you doing?"

"I was just looking for a place to put some things of mine." She heard the guilty note in her voice and stopped. "I didn't mean to pry."

"I know." He crossed the room and took the picture from her, staring down at it without speaking.

"Who was she?"

"Alice," he answered, his tone

absent. "Our families were close. We'd known each other since childhood. We were engaged."

"Did you love her very much?" She had to ask.

Quentin nodded slowly. "Yes, I did."

"What happened?" she asked, needing to know.

"She died," he said simply, "and I wished I had died, too."

Perhaps Katie's indrawn breath reminded him who he was talking to. He shook his head suddenly, glancing up at her.

"It's all a long time ago. I'd forgotten where this picture was." His tone made it clear that the subject was closed. Still carrying the picture, he turned and left. Katie moved to the bed to sit down. Vaguely, she wondered what he'd come in for, why he'd called her name.

Alice. Even her name was lovely. A woman from his own world. A woman his family would have welcomed.

Katie wrapped her arms around her stomach as if that could cushion the pain. It didn't matter how often she reminded herself that love had never been part of this marriage bargain, there was still the small foolish part of her that kept dreaming.

The photograph had left those dreams in tatters.

THE CLOUDS that had looked so innocent the day before had built and darkened until they filled the sky to the north. Katie watched them with a mixture of anticipation and con-

cern. If only the rain wasn't too heavy.

Turning away from the window, she moved to the kitchen table and poked an experimental finger into the bread she'd set to rise. The loaves were ready and she transferred them to the oven, once she'd tested the heat by thrusting her forearm inside. It had taken more singed arms than she cared to remember before she learned to judge the temperature. She'd buried any number of ruined loaves behind the woodshed.

But she'd learned. Her bread was as good as any she'd tasted. She wondered if Alice had ever baked a loaf of bread. Katie pushed the oven door shut, exasperated by the way her thoughts kept turning to the other woman. Alice was dead. Quentin was married to *her* now.

But he'd thought he was taking a wife with some expertise in all the myriad tasks that went with running a home, she reminded herself.

"Well, I've learned, haven't I?" she asked aloud.

Luckily, she'd found a garden manual on Quentin's bookshelf, followed it faithfully and now had a healthy patch of young plants. It was the one place where she felt she'd been a complete success.

Her cooking was only adequate. The milk cow seemed to despise her. The chickens showed an amount of tolerance, but that was because she hadn't yet tried to take any of them to the chopping block.

Quentin left early and worked late. They rarely talked, and they

still didn't share a bed, so she could hardly say that her marriage was a total success. She couldn't say that she and Quentin knew each other much better now than they had when they married.

Katie sighed, picking up a linen towel to dry the bowl she'd just washed. Quentin was probably sorry he'd married her, and who could blame him?

Just then, thunder cracked, loud enough to rattle the windows. Katie jumped, running to the window as the skies opened.

In all her life she'd never seen such a storm. Rain fell in sheets, a nearly solid wall of water.

She ran to the back door, throwing it open to step out on the little porch. Would the dry ground be able to absorb the rain or were her small plants going to be washed away? Perhaps if she covered them with some of the bushel baskets she'd seen in the shed...

She dropped her shoes onto the porch and stripped off her socks, lifting her skirts as she ran into the storm. Drenched by the time she reached the shed, she found the baskets, lifted a stack of them and hurried out.

She'd taken only a few steps when she realized that the rain had changed to hail. It speeded her footsteps, for the hail surely spelled her garden's doom.

The size of the stones had increased to that of small rocks, striking with force enough to raise welts. But Katie hardly noticed as she set baskets over small plants already

showing damage. In her mind, it wasn't just a few plants she was trying to save, it was her marriage, maybe her whole life.

The hail pelted her unprotected head, but she didn't pause.

"What do you think you're doing?" Quentin's bellow startled her. "Dammit, woman, you'll be hurt. Let the plants be and come inside."

"Not until I've covered as much as I can," she said stubbornly.

"Now." She tried to pull back as he took her arm and drew her to her feet. "Let the damn plants take care of themselves," he all but shouted.

"I won't."

A bolt of lightning speared down, striking the earth so near them that the air seemed electrified.

"You will," Quentin said calmly. He stepped forward, scooped her against his chest and strode toward the house. Katie made one convulsive attempt to escape and then held still.

The kitchen was warm, filled with the rich scent of baking bread. He set her on her feet in the middle of the floor. Her hair hung down her back in a thick, wet braid. Her dress was soaking wet.

"Are you crazy?" Quentin demanded, glaring at her. "We can get hailstones the size of a man's fist in one of these storms."

"I had to cover the plants," she said stubbornly.

"Look at your arm," he said angrily, showing her the reddened skin. "And you're soaking wet. You could catch pneumonia. And the

nearest doctor is nearly a day's ride away."

"Don't worry. If I catch pneumonia, I'll try to die peacefully without asking you to send for the doctor." She hardly knew what she was saying. Tears blurred his tall figure. "It was the one thing I'd done right," she lashed out, wiping angrily at her tears. "The cow hates me and I can't kill a chicken, but those plants were growing."

"Katie." Quentin's voice softened when he saw her distress. He reached for her but she twitched away.

"I don't need your pity," she snapped, her chin coming up. "You married me out of pity. I knew that. You went to San Francisco to look for a wife and you felt sorry for me. Well, I don't need your pity."

"Katie." He reached out. "I didn't marry you out of pity." His hand slipped under her chin, tilting her face up. "I thought we could make a good marriage together. Only a fool would marry for pity."

She could see nothing but honesty in his eyes. "Then why haven't you—"

She broke off, feeling her cheeks flush as she looked away. But Quentin understood.

"I said I'd give you time." He let his hand slip from her chin to rest along the side of her neck. "I didn't want to rush you, Katie."

"You're not rushing me," she said, cheeks burning at her own boldness.

He pulled her a step closer. "Look at me, Katie." Her lashes

lifted slowly. She could only guess at what he saw in her eyes, but the look in his sent a shiver down her spine. "Are you afraid of me, Katie?"

She shook her head slowly. "I know you'd not willingly hurt me," she said.

"Willingly?" He questioned the word. "Katie Aileen Sterling, I promise I'll never knowingly cause you pain. Do you believe that?"

"Yes."

"We've a marriage that isn't. It seems to me time we did something about it. Do you trust me?"

The hands she set against his chest trembled, but her eyes were steady on his as she answered.

"With my life."

This kiss was different. It held more demand, more hunger, more need. It was the need she responded to, opening her lips to him, her tongue entwining with his as she sank against his chest.

After a moment Quentin lifted his head. He looked down into her eyes, feeling his stomach tighten at the innocent sensuality of her gaze. He wanted her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted something so badly. It wasn't just a sexual need, it was a deep visceral hunger that only she could satisfy.

She gasped as he bent, scooping her up in his arms.

"I'm wet."

"I'll help you get dry," he said huskily, his mouth coming down on hers as he carried her into the bedroom.

Outside, the hail had turned to

rain. The worst of the storm had passed, but the clouds blocked out the sunlight, leaving the bedroom dim.

Quentin set Katie down next to the bed. He undressed her slowly, his eyes never leaving hers.

When she stood before him at last, clad in nothing but thin cotton knickers and a lace-trimmed chemise, there was no disappointment in Quentin's eyes. He tugged loose the ribbon bow at the top of her chemise, then the tiny pearl buttons fell open beneath his touch. Katie gasped as his hand slid inside to cup her breast. She'd never dreamed a simple touch could start such a fire raging inside her.

She felt a deep sense of loss when his hand left her, but it was only so he could strip off his coat. His shirt followed and her vision was filled with the width of his chest. A thick mat of golden-brown hair covered the taut muscles, tapering to a thin line that disappeared into the waistband of his jeans.

She jerked her eyes up, her cheeks flushing at the glimpse she'd had of his arousal. The flush deepened when Quentin's hands went to the buttons of his pants, but he didn't take them off immediately. Instead, he reached for her hands, holding them against his chest until he felt her relax. Slowly she moved her fingers, feeling the springy mat of hair curl against her hands. Quentin held his breath at her innocent exploration that was somehow very erotic.

Burying his fingers in her hair, he

tilted her head back, catching her mouth with his. Katie felt her head spin as he pulled her close, slipping the chemise from her shoulders so that her breasts pressed boldly against the warm skin of his chest.

Nothing could have prepared her for the feelings that flowed through her. In a matter of minutes she could think of nothing but the warm pleasure washing over her.

When Quentin lifted her onto the bed and kicked off his jeans before following her down into the feather mattress, Katie opened her arms to him. This was her husband—the man she loved with all her heart.

KATIE came awake slowly. Her sleep had been light but restful. She stirred in the big bed, aware of a feeling of fulfillment she'd never had before. Without opening her eyes, she shifted one foot, cautiously seeking. She wasn't sure whether she felt relief or disappointment when she found she was alone.

She was really and truly a married woman now. Odd how something she'd regarded with a mixture of fear and fascination should turn out to feel so natural. Wonderful actually, she admitted to herself, feeling the color flood her face as she remembered the response she'd given so readily.

There was a muffled thud from the direction of the kitchen and Katie swung her legs off the bed. She dressed hastily, muttering over uncooperative buttons, terrified that Quentin would walk in. They might

have made their marriage real at last but it was going to take her a while to get used to the idea of sharing his room.

Another thud made her decide against trying to pin her hair up. She tied the unruly mass back with a wide ribbon.

Katie approached the kitchen warily. There was an odd, harsh smell in the air.

"My bread!" She entered the kitchen in a rush as Quentin turned from the stove, the last pan in his hand.

"I smelled them burning," he said. "It's too bad I didn't smell them a bit sooner."

"I followed the steps so carefully this time," she said sadly.

"It was my fault for distracting you."

At that, she glanced at him, the ruined bread forgotten. Her cheeks flushed.

"Don't worry about the bread," he told her, and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot always left warming on the stove.

She turned from him, finding it easier to sustain her casual air if she wasn't looking directly at him.

"Are you all right?" She jumped when his voice came from directly behind her.

"I'm fine."

"Then why won't you look at me?" His hands settled on her shoulders, turning her to face him.

"I've looked at you," she mumbled to his chest.

"Do you truly think I married you out of pity?"

The question brought her eyes to his face.

"I...I don't know," she admitted at last.

Quentin released her, turning away to pick up his cup. "We haven't talked much, have we?" he said. "I married you for just the reasons I gave you in San Francisco. I felt we could build something together.

"I've lived here alone for several years and I could feel civilization slipping away from me. A true home needs a woman, children," he added softly.

Katie felt a warm glow inside at the thought of children. Even now, she could be carrying his child. It was an incredible thought.

"I needed someone to help me build this ranch," he went on. "Someone strong. A woman who didn't expect to be waited on hand and foot. A woman who could take care of herself."

"You needed a woman who knows about cooking and cleaning and caring for animals," she said. "I should have told you at the start that I'd no experience with such things. We never settled in one place long enough for me to learn."

"Your family moved often?" he questioned, realizing that he'd given little thought to her background.

"We were a theater family," she said.

"Theater?" Odd, he'd never have imagined Katie coming from that background. "You were on stage?"

"Yes."

She waited for his reaction.

Though times were changing, many still felt that being in the theater put one on the lowest possible social rung.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" He didn't seem upset or angry, only curious.

"You didn't ask, and I thought I could learn the things I needed to know." She poked one of the blackened loaves. "I wanted you to feel you'd made the right choice in marrying me."

He set his cup down and took her by the shoulders again. "I *did* make the right choice, Katie. I'm glad I married you. You've brought warmth and light into this place. You've turned it into a home, just as I knew you would."

Katie heard little beyond his first words. He was glad. The only thing that would have made her happier was if he'd told her that he loved her.

*

KATIE TOOK UP her pen and wrote.

May 1905

Dear Edith,

It's been too long since I last wrote, I know. I can only tell you that my life has been so full, I seldom have time to write a letter.

I am glad to hear that you and Colin have made peace and that you are seeing him occasionally. I know it's foolish, but I do worry about him. He's

a grown man, I know, but it makes me feel better to know that he has friends like you.

We had a terrible hailstorm nearly two months ago and I thought the garden entirely lost. Fortunately, I've found that plants, no matter how fragile they seem, are quite sturdy. Most of them survived, and they are now thriving.

Life in Wyoming is so different from that in the city. The first and most obvious difference is the lack of people. Though we have neighbors, I've yet to meet them, for they live several miles away.

I've seen no one but Quentin and the hands since coming here. I must admit that the solitude can be wearing. I miss having a chance to chat with another woman. It's a lonely life but a very good one, I think.

Please let me know how Colin goes on. I've had only one card from him since leaving the city. Write soon.

Your fond friend,
Katie

The most important news was something Katie wasn't quite ready to share with anyone. She set her hand over her stomach, hardly daring to hope that her suspicion was correct. Carrying Quentin's child would make her life complete, or nearly so.

"You're a fool, Katie, to be al-

ways wanting more than you have," she whispered to herself.

She and Quentin had developed a certain closeness over the past two months. It might not be a grand, passionate love, but it was enough for now, or so she'd made herself believe. Love could grow. *That* she did believe.

June 1905

Dear Katie,

I should have written before now, for I have important news for you. But first, I want to tell you how much I enjoyed your letter.

The Sterlings, by the way, had a terrible fight with old Mr. MacNamara. It seems that Mr. Sterling had suggested that he might forbid your Quentin to enter the house again.

Mr. MacNamara, on hearing this, hit the dinner table with his fist and said that, as long as his money was supporting the household, he would be the one to decide who would be welcome.

I had this information from Mary, who was serving dinner that night, for I had already left their employ.

Anyway, Mr. MacNamara said that he felt Quentin had made a fine choice in marrying you and that you were both welcome in *his* house any time you cared to visit.

With that out of the way, perhaps I should tell you my

news.

Colin and I are wed. Only a week past, we went to Oakland, which some are saying is the Gretia Green of California, and were married. My parents had forbid the match, because of Colin's employment at the Rearing Stallion. But once the deed was done and they saw how happy I am, they forgave us and welcomed him into the family.

The next day Colin found employment at the Grand Opera House. He said that he would not be dictated to but nor did he wish to cause his new in-laws any concern. I believe it amused my father greatly.

I am very happy to be your sister in marriage, Katie dear. And I hope you will forgive us our unseemly haste. I'm sure you know that, once your brother's mind is decided, he sees no reason to hesitate before taking action.

He asks me to send you his affection and best wishes and the hope that we will all be together again soon.

Yours,
Edith

Katie was hardly surprised by Edith's news. She'd almost expected it. Colin married. She was happy for him. And for Edith, but the news made her feel slightly melancholy,

too. They'd married for love. How she envied them that.

She sighed. It wasn't that she regretted her marriage to Quentin. He was all that was good and kind. But she sometimes felt as if there were a wall built around him.

"Maybe when he lost his Alice, he truly lost his heart. Maybe he'll never love again," she said aloud.

Could she bear it if Quentin was never more than the slightly affectionate companion he was now? The only place she felt as if he truly belonged to her was in the privacy of their bed. There, she felt no ghosts, no walls. But there had to be more to a marriage than that.

Quentin had said he wanted to build something good and fine. Well, she wanted that, too. But part of what she wanted to build was a strong bond between them, and she couldn't do that alone. Her palm flattened against her stomach.

Would the child she was now sure she carried help her forge that bond? Surely he couldn't keep her at a distance while she was carrying his child, perhaps a son to carry on his dream.

March 1906

Dear Katie,
Colin and I were so relieved to hear that you and baby Geoffrey are both well. You said it was a difficult birth, so I hope you have fully recovered by now.

You will be pleased to hear that we have purchased a

house. My father provided us with a reference and much of the initial monies. Though Colin did not care for the idea of accepting help, I persuaded him that it was for the best. After all, my father considers it a good investment, as the value of real estate is sure to go up.

It is a tiny house, sold as an artist's cottage. It is south of Market Street, so we are not on Nob Hill yet. Just five rooms and a bath, but the basement is finished. It cost three thousand dollars and I know you gasp at such a price, dear Katie, but it really is quite a bargain.

Colin is enjoying his work at the Grand Opera House.

Which brings me to my real purpose in writing this letter. Katie, dear, do come and see us. We long to meet our new nephew. Our home is small, but still enough to supply you with all the comforts you need.

You have told me that spring is a busy time on a ranch, so I know better than to suggest that Mr. Sterling join you. But surely he could spare you for a few weeks.

Just send us a wire and let us know when to pick you up at the station.

I'll say farewell for now, but I hope that soon I will be saying hello.

Your fond sister,
Edith

Katie let the letter fall to her lap. Outside, the sun shone with unreasonable brightness. The snow lingered in the shadowed places but most of the yard was a sea of mud.

From the talk around the supper table she knew that more snow was likely. With spring calving just around the corner, a heavy snowfall could be disastrous.

She could see that Quentin was concerned, though he didn't say anything. But then, lately, he didn't say much to her beyond what was necessary.

She sighed, leaning back against the rocker, looking down at Geoff, who was lying on a thick quilt at her feet, gurgling contentedly.

Quentin's withdrawal could be dated to Geoff's birth, but she'd been unable to find a cause for it. She was getting more than a little exasperated. He was a good father, spending more time with the baby than most men would. But to his son's mother, he seemed to have nothing to say.

She'd even asked him if he was upset with her for some reason. He'd seemed genuinely surprised and assured her that nothing was wrong.

"But there is something wrong," she told the baby. "We had drawn closer. And suddenly he changed." She lifted her hands, letting them fall to her lap. "Is it possible he was just being kind to me because I was carrying you?"

Geoff gurgled, waving at a dust mote that floated on a sunbeam above him.

"But that doesn't seem right. He's so reserved. It's as if he doesn't even like me." She picked up Edith's letter. "Maybe some time apart will be the best thing."

Maybe he'll ask me to stay.

BUT HE DIDN'T. She brought the subject up after she'd put Geoff down for the night. Quentin was seated at his desk, making entries in the ranch books.

"I received a letter from Edith today," she told him.

"That's nice. How are she and Colin doing?" Quentin didn't lift his head.

"They've bought themselves a small house. Edith has invited me and Geoff to come and stay with them."

Quentin's pen hesitated a moment.

"Do you want to go?" he asked without inflection.

"Well, Geoff should meet his family. And he will be needing clothes before too long and I could purchase fabric. It's so much better than ordering by mail."

"Certainly, if you wish to go, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't."

It wasn't until she heard him say it that Katie realized how much she'd been hoping he'd say he didn't want her to go—that the idea of her leaving might make him realize how much he'd miss her.

"It would not be worth making the trip for less than several weeks' stay," she said.

"Of course not." He set down the pen, turning to give her an avuncular smile. "I think it will be a very good thing for you. I know you've missed Colin. Besides, you've been looking a little peaked since Geoff's birth. Some time in the city is probably just what you need."

Katie kept her eyes on her knitting so that he wouldn't see the tears that threatened. He sounded as if it didn't matter at all to him that she and the baby would be gone.

"Yes, maybe it will be good for me," she said dully. She stood. "I think I'll go to bed now."

"Fine. I've a few more things to do. When would you like to leave? If the weather holds, the roads should be passable by the day after tomorrow. If we start early, we should reach Laramie by nightfall."

She started toward the bedroom, wanting only to bury her face in her pillow and have a good cry.

"Katie." Quentin's voice stopped her in the doorway and she turned.

"Don't worry about packing a great deal. I'll give you a letter of credit and you can draw on my account. Outfit yourself as well as Geoff."

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The door closed behind her with deceptive quietness. Once in the bedroom, she stood, fists clenched, slowly reciting the soliloquy from *Hamlet* to herself. Her father had always sworn that it was the best thing he knew for calming nerves.

That done, she undressed for bed, slipping her nightgown over her

head before moving over to the cradle to check on Geoff. The baby slept soundly.

Quentin was sleeping in the room he'd built as a nursery last summer. When she'd asked why he hadn't returned to their bedroom, his eyes had shifted away and he'd mumbled something about Geoff waking in the night. It hadn't made much sense, but she'd felt shy about questioning him further.

Crawling between the cold linens, Katie felt as if they were no colder than her heart tonight. She didn't know why, but she had to face the fact that whatever affection Quentin might have begun to feel for her had died.

Now what she had to decide was whether or not she could continue in such a sterile marriage.

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"KATIE!" Edith's cry turned several heads as, hitching Geoff farther up on her hip, Katie turned toward the sound. She saw Colin first and felt tears start to her eyes. How could she have forgotten how handsome he was, how tall and strong?

"Katie?" Edith darted around a stout woman who was arguing with the porter. "You look wonderful! And this must be Geoff. Oh, what a big boy he is. May I hold him?"

Geoff, who generally objected to strangers, stared in fascination at Edith. Katie decided it must have been her enormous hat, complete with a stuffed bird that bobbed up and down as she nodded.

"Katie. How are you, lass?" Katie all but fell into Colin's arms, feeling her tears spill over.

"Here, here," he protested, half laughing. "You're supposed to be glad to see me, not turn into a watering pot." He tilted her chin up.

"I am glad to see you." She sniffed, giving him a wide smile to prove it. "Once I've had some tea and a chance to rest, I'll be my old self."

In a short while, she was comfortably ensconced in a wing chair in what Edith proudly called the parlor. A cup of tea steamed by her elbow and Edith had provided a plate of small homemade biscuits.

Colin solemnly warned Katie to have care, as her teeth might suffer if she attempted his wife's cooking. Edith hit his shoulder, blushing and calling him a traitor. He caught her hand and kissed it, promising to break all his teeth on her biscuits, if only he could be forgiven.

Watching their silly play, Katie felt a wave of melancholy. This was what a marriage could be like. Husband and wife as friends and companions. If she couldn't have that, did she want anything less?

IF COLIN and Edith suspected there was more to Katie's visit than the desire to see San Francisco again, neither of them said anything. They gave her just what she'd wanted, time to think.

When thinking grew too much to bear, she shopped, outfitting Geoff with a wardrobe that would last him

for the next year or two. And for herself she purchased fabric such as she'd only dreamed of in the past. It was always a surprise to find that the Sterling name brought her a certain deference even in the finest stores.

She indulged in only two ready-made gowns, the first a lovely evening gown of pale green satin with a décolletage that made her blush.

The second was a soft day dress in palest apricot, with rows of lace around the hem and hundreds of tiny tucks over the bodice. She closed her eyes to the cost, telling herself that she was a Sterling now.

But the dress was also for a special occasion. Though Quentin had told her not to visit his parents, Katie couldn't pretend they didn't exist.

So she donned the apricot gown, dressed Geoff in a fine little suit of navy and white and had a carriage take her to the Sterling mansion.

With a sleeping Geoff in her arms, she turned to look down the street, delaying the moment when she'd have to face her in-laws. In the distance she could see the blue of the bay. It looked so calm and peaceful.

Lifting her chin, she turned and walked up the brick path, raising her skirt slightly as she climbed the four stairs to the door. She could hear the bell ring somewhere in the house and felt almost light-headed with nervousness. Maybe Quentin had been right.

But before she could change her mind, the huge door swung open.

The maid was no one she recognized.

"Yes, ma'am?" The deferential tone gave Katie courage.

"Mrs. Quentin Sterling to see Mrs. Sterling, please."

The girl's eyes widened. She might have come to work here in the past year, but she was obviously well caught up on her gossip.

"Oh, my." Without another word, she pushed the door shut, leaving Katie standing on the porch. When the door opened again, it was Mrs. Dixon who stood on the other side.

The housekeeper looked down her thin nose at the woman and child outside.

"Mrs. Sterling is not at home to you," she said coldly, but Katie was prepared for this and had her reply ready.

"Then I'd like to see Mr. MacNamara, please. I'm sure he'll want to meet his great-grandson."

Mrs. Dixon hesitated. Katie knew she longed to shut the door in the intruder's face, but if she did so and Mr. MacNamara found out...

"Come in, please. I'll inform Mr. MacNamara of your arrival."

Katie stepped into the huge marble foyer, her chin held high. She had as much right to be here as anyone, if not for her own sake, then for Geoff's. He was a Sterling and she'd not see him shut away from his family.

Mrs. Dixon came back down the wide staircase. "Mr. MacNamara will see you now. If you'll come this way."

If the rest of the Sterling family wanted nothing to do with her or her son, Tobias MacNamara didn't share their feelings. In fact, he positively delighted in their presence in his suite of rooms.

Geoff seemed entertained by his great-grandfather and Tobias got to see him at his sunny best.

It was only when the baby began to tire that the old man turned his attention to Katie.

"So, how's that grandson of mine? Why isn't he here with you?"

"Spring is a very busy time at the ranch," Katie said.

"Pshaw. The boy could get away if he'd a mind to. Not having problems, are you?" He didn't wait for her to answer, which was just as well, because she couldn't think of a thing to say. "He's a good lad, but prone to being moody. He thinks too much. That's been his problem all along.

"Take this girl Alice." He nodded when he saw Katie start at the name. "I thought that might be part of the problem. I'd have warned you at the start, but we hardly knew each other. Not that we know each other all that well now, but this little boy here, he kind of speeds things up."

"I do feel as if I've known you longer than I have," Katie said shyly.

"I do, too. I was pleased enough when Quentin told me you two were getting married. Hadn't seen a lot of you, but it doesn't take long to see character. And I saw it in you. Strength, too. He made a good choice."

"I'm not sure he'd agree," Katie said in a whisper.

"Well, if it's Alice you're worried about, don't be. Oh, she was a sweet child. Pretty as a picture, but she and Quentin would never have suited. She was too soft and gentle. Quentin would have found that out sooner or later."

Katie longed to believe him. But the fact was that Quentin had said he'd wanted to die, too, when he lost Alice.

Setting aside the tragic Alice, there was still no reason to think he cared for her. Before Geoff was born, she'd begun to think it possible, but he'd grown so cool and distant.

Still, the visit with Tobias made her feel better. Maybe she shouldn't give up so soon.

THESE WERE the thoughts that were running through her head the next night as she lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Sighing, she turned her face into the pillow, determined to get at least an hour's sleep before Geoff woke her at six with a demand to be fed.

The mantel clock in the parlor was chiming three as sheer will-power got her to sleep, but it seemed as if she'd barely closed her eyes when she woke to a deep rumbling sound, like the growl of a great animal.

Katie sat up with a start, noting that the furniture was moving as if in some bizarre dance. The rumbling became a roar as the little house

shook. Her first thought was for the baby in his crib near the wall. She jumped out of bed, only to be knocked to the floor as it undulated beneath her.

Lying there, she knew the meaning of absolute terror. It was as if the city had been caught up by a giant terrier and was being shaken like a rat.

The shaking stopped and she lunged toward the cradle to snatch Geoff up. She had time for only that before the shaking started again, more fierce this time. Staggering, she grabbed for the bedpost, clutching the baby to her with her free hand.

She watched in horror as the whole side of the house began to shudder, and then suddenly the wall broke loose, falling outward with a sound that only echoed the sounds of shattered masonry and falling brick all around.

Above it all, incongruous as a dream, she could hear the bells of Old St. Mary's Church, north of Market, frantically ringing as if to announce the end of the world.

The shaking stopped and, aside from the bell, it was suddenly silent, the quiet of the tomb. She could only stand there, trembling, holding Geoff close.

From the corner of her eye she caught a movement. A calendar fluttered on the wall, the lovely girl pictured on it a contrast to the destruction she so obviously presided over.

Katie focused her mind on the

date, as if it were of vital importance.

April 18, 1906.

QUENTIN RODE hunch-shouldered and ill-tempered. Why was it that life never worked out as planned? He'd planned to marry Alice and spend his life with her. Then she'd died and he'd sworn never to love again, never to let anyone close enough that her loss could leave him broken and bleeding inside.

And then he'd met Katie.

He'd admired her spirit. He'd found a certain peace when she was near. And he'd told himself that it would be a good thing to marry her. A man shouldn't go through life alone—he should have heirs to inherit what he'd built.

He'd thought Katie would make a good wife and she'd not expect him to love her. It had been a good plan, he told himself irritably. Only that plan hadn't worked, either. He'd made the singular mistake of falling in love with his wife. He loved the way her nose wrinkled when she laughed, the way she frowned while she was cooking. He loved the way her hair always managed to escape its pins. The way she blushed when he unbuttoned her nightgown. And then how passionately she responded to his touch.

When she'd nearly died having his son, he had no longer been able to pretend that all he felt was fondness. Faced with losing her, he'd had to face his feelings. But he'd fought them tooth and nail.

He didn't *want* to love anyone that much again. He didn't want to be so vulnerable. He didn't want all his happiness tied up in another person. He'd arranged his life so well. How dare she destroy his neat pattern?

He'd treated his love for her like an illness that would go away if given a chance to run its course. He'd been a fool, he admitted to himself.

It wasn't until she was gone that he'd learned the true meaning of loneliness. His temper had gone from bad to worse after her departure. She hadn't even been gone a week when one of the hands threatened to quit. Quentin had reined in his ill temper after that, but Tate, his foreman, had finally taken him aside and, with the familiarity of an old man talking to a young fool, suggested that he go to San Francisco and bring his wife home.

Quentin had railed all night against the idea. He wouldn't love her. And then he'd gone into the room they'd shared and stared at the bed where they'd made love, the bed where their son had been born. He'd pushed his boot against the cradle, listening to the quiet rhythm of the rockers against the wood floor.

The house seemed to echo with emptiness. All the heart was gone from it. "I love you, Katie Aileen Sterling." He spoke the words out loud and wondered if it was his imagination that made the room seem suddenly brighter, warmer.

Now here he was, almost to Lar-amie and frozen half to death. He

had fresh clothes strapped to the back of the saddle. He was going to catch the first train to San Francisco, find his wife and tell her just what a fool he'd been. And he wasn't leaving the city without her.

He'd started well before dawn, but it was after dark when he rode into town and made his way to the livery stable. He left his horse to be cared for, and walked directly to the railway station, though his stomach suggested that stopping to eat might be a good idea. He'd eat on the train, if he was lucky enough to catch one tonight.

"Hello, Bill. You're working late." The stationmaster turned as Quentin leaned in the ticket window.

"Hello, Quentin. Goin' somewhere?"

"San Francisco, if there's a train."

"There's one should be comin' through in about three hours. Bringin' relief from Chicago."

"Relief?" Quentin felt a frisson of alarm.

"That's right. There was a big earthquake just this morning. Newspapers are sayin' the city's leveled. No tellin' how many are dead."

"My God." Quentin straightened. Katie and Geoff were there. And the rest of his family.

"You still want to go?" Bill questioned.

"Yes. My family is there."

"Oh, say." Bill's face wrinkled with concern. "I'm sorry about that. I'd forgot you were from the coast." He shifted uncomfortably. "Well,

you know how the newspapers exaggerate. Probably wasn't near as bad as they say. Your wife there?"

"Yes. And our son."

"Say, that's too bad, but I bet you'll find them snug as anything. Sure, they'll be fine."

Quentin turned away without answering. Moving to the edge of the platform, he stared toward the west. Katie was there. And Geoff. Everything he loved most in the world. If he hadn't been such a fool... If only he'd told her how he felt, she wouldn't have gone.

THE HOURS immediately following the quake were like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*. Within fifteen minutes, columns of smoke could be seen rising from various parts of the city, many of the blazes in the area south of Market where Colin and Edith lived.

The firemen were well trained and efficient, but they were hampered at first by the scattered positions of the fires, and then a far more serious problem became evident. The water from the hoses slowed to a trickle and stopped. The shifting earth had snapped the water mains, leaving the firemen virtually helpless against the advancing blaze.

All of this Katie learned later. In those first few minutes she could only stand in the ruins of her little bedroom, clutching her son and offering up a prayer of thanks that they had been spared.

"Katie? Katie, are you all right?"

Colin's voice was harsh with fear.

"I'm fine. And the baby's fine."

He thrust open her door, his face white. "Is Edith safe?"

"Yes." He seemed unaware of the cut on his forehead, probably from falling plaster. "You'd better put on some clothes. I'll gather what food we have. There's no telling what this day will bring."

By noon, one square mile of the city lay in ashes and the fires were still raging. Colin had shepherdd his small family out into the street, their food tied in a hobo-style knapsack. In a matter of hours it was clear that their little house, like the whole area south of Market, was doomed.

Without water, Fire Chief Sullivan's brave men could do little to fight the flames. And they later learned that Dennis Sullivan himself had been fatally injured, trying to rescue his wife.

The fire burned for three and a half days. The great Palace Hotel, which had boasted huge water tanks on its roof to provide its own protection from fires, burned before dusk, its water tanks empty.

As Katie and her family hurried through the streets, they saw signs of high comedy and high tragedy. There were men in nightshirts and frock coats, carrying silk top hats and flower vases, whatever had been near to hand when they'd fled their homes.

Several times they stopped to aid in the rescue of some poor soul trapped in the rubble of a fallen building. Twice the aid had come

too late and Colin had turned away, his face grim, his hands bleeding.

They spent the night crouched in a small park, wrapped in blankets Edith and Katie had carried from their home. Dinner was beans eaten from a tin can, and they felt fortunate to have that much.

Katie cradled Geoff to her bosom, wrapping the blanket modestly about her as she nursed, grateful that she didn't have to worry about food for him.

The sky was bright with the reflected flames from the blazing city below. It seemed to Katie as if the whole world was burning. Holding Geoff close, she drew what comfort she could from his sturdy little body. She'd seen enough women sobbing in the street, begging for some word of their missing children, to know how lucky she was.

Exhaustion finally overcame numbed shock and she lay back, drawing the blanket about her and the baby, praying that the sun would rise on a better day.

BUT ON THURSDAY morning the fire still blazed. The City Hall, newspaper row and the Grand Opera House were all gone. The fire was nearing the crest of Nob Hill. Katie hoped the Sterlings had gotten to safety. And old Mr. MacNamara.

Colin moved his small family to the Presidio. Tents and shacks were set up among the rows of military buildings, giving shelter to hundreds of refugees. Military rations were passed out to those in need.

Katie managed to rig a sort of pack that held Geoff to her bosom but left her hands free, and she helped out wherever she could, distributing food, bandaging small wounds. She and Edith worked from dawn to dusk, while Colin had gone back into the city to do what he could. All day they could hear the sound of blasting as the firefighters struggled to stop the flames from consuming the entire city.

But it wasn't until midafternoon on Saturday, three and a half days after the earthquake, that the last of the fires were doused. When the news reached Katie, she sat down on the ground and started to cry. For the first time since the earthquake she allowed herself to believe that they were going to be safe. They'd be able to go home.

She'd hardly let herself think of home these past terrible days. But it had always been there, in the back of her mind. Home and Quentin.

Quentin. Was he worried about her? Isolated as the ranch was, it was possible he didn't even know about the earthquake and fire. Had he missed her at all?

She held Geoff close, laying her cheek against the downy softness of his hair. The smell of smoke was so prevalent she hardly noticed it anymore.

"Colin!" Edith's voice broke on the cry and Katie looked up in time to see her brother throw his arms about his wife. He was filthy with soot and grime, but unharmed. Katie stood up and Colin lifted one arm from Edith's shoulders to draw her

close. After a moment she stepped back, reaching up to wipe at the tears that had left tracks on her dirty cheeks. Colin, his arms still around Edith, grinned at his sister.

"I have brought you a present. Someone I happened to run into."

At his gesture Katie turned. Her heart seemed to stop. "Quentin." His name was hardly a breath. He stood right in front of her when she'd thought him a thousand miles away. She blinked, trying to clear the tears from her eyes, sure that she was hallucinating.

"Katie." His voice was low and husky. He was as filthy as everyone else, his work shirt torn, his jeans streaked with soot and dirt. It seemed strange to see him here in clothes he'd only worn on the ranch.

She stared at him, searching for something to say. All she wanted was to have him put his arms around her and hold her close, to hear him tell her that he loved her, that he wanted to take her home.

"What are you doing here?" The question was all she could manage.

"I was worried about you and Geoff."

She looked down, stroking her son's hand. Of course he had been worried about Geoff. She'd never had reason to doubt that he loved his child. She blinked back foolish tears.

"Geoff is fine. He's too young to know what's happened."

"That's good." Quentin pushed his hands into his pockets and then pulled them out again, staring at them. Around him were sounds of

celebration that the fire was at last out.

"Have you been here long?" Katie asked at last.

"Yesterday. I got here yesterday. It wasn't easy. The rails are damaged, you know." He squinted toward the city. "I couldn't find you. Nearly everything south of Market has burned. It was sheer luck that I saw Colin. I'd still be looking for you otherwise."

"Yes, that was lucky." She stared at his boots, fighting back tears.

"I even went to my family's home."

She glanced up. "Are they all right? We heard most of Nob Hill had burned. I prayed they got out in time."

"The house is gone. Everyone got out safely. My grandfather commandeered an automobile and packed the whole family across the bay Wednesday night. One of the servants told me they were safe. She also told me you'd been to visit them."

She lifted her chin. "I thought they might want to see their grandson. Your grandfather was most kind."

"But my parents refused to see you." He shook his head, narrowing his eyes against the sun. "My mother was so proud of that big house on the hill, and now she's left with little more than her own servants."

There didn't seem to be anything to add to that. Katie brushed her tangled hair back from her face and,

glancing up, caught Quentin's eyes on her, a look in them she couldn't quite interpret. He looked almost hungry.

"I was coming to see you before I knew about the earthquake, Katie," he said abruptly. "I was coming to take you home, where you belong."

"Quentin?" She felt her heart slow until she could count each beat. For so long she had dreamed of seeing that look in his eyes.

"Will you forgive me, Katie, and come home? It's empty without you. *I'm empty without you.*"

There was a frozen moment where she couldn't seem to move and then she was in his arms, feeling them close, strong and warm, about her.

"Oh, God, I was such a fool." His voice was muffled in her hair, but she heard the words clearly. "I love you, Katie. I love you. I thought I'd lost you forever. I couldn't live without you."

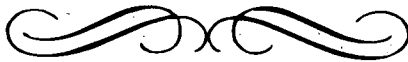
She closed her eyes. If this was a dream, then she didn't want to wake up.

Geoff dispelled the dreamlike atmosphere by letting out a loud cry, indignant at the way his parents were squashing him between them. Quentin's arms loosened enough to allow the baby some room. One hand cupped Katie's cheek, his eyes looking deeply into hers. Katie felt fresh tears spring to her eyes at the expression she saw in his.

All her dreams were coming true. San Francisco would be rebuilt, bigger and better than ever. But she wouldn't be there to see it.

She was going to be in a place where you could look for miles without seeing another person, a place where she'd put down roots, strong and sturdy.

Leaning her head against Quentin's shoulder, their son held close, she knew she'd found the home she'd always dreamed of, right here in Quentin's arms.





ELIZABETH AUGUST



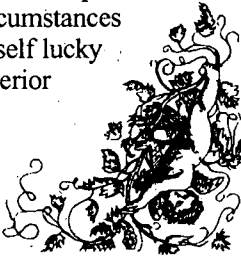

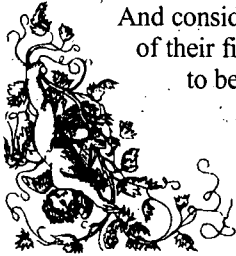
Elizabeth August—aka Betsy Page—lives in western North Carolina with her husband and sons. She's always wanted to write and began writing romances soon after her youngest of three sons was born. She loves to bowl, "but I'm not very good," she says. "I keep my team's handicap high."

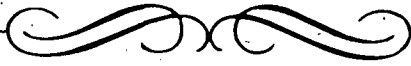
Elizabeth also likes hiking in the Shenandoahs, as long as she starts up the mountain in order to make the return trip down rather than vice versa. In addition, she loves to go to Cape Hatteras to watch the sun rise. Be sure to look for her upcoming Silhouette Intimate Moments title, *Girls' Night Out*, in September 1998.



The Bonded Heart

Virtually without a roof over her head, Sara Manderly couldn't refuse Brad Garwood's offer as a live-in housekeeper. And considering the rather unfortunate circumstances of their first meeting, she considered herself lucky to be asked at all. But were there ulterior motives for Brad's proposition?





With difficulty Sara Manderly guided her car into a parking space nearly two blocks from her destination. Her dress, a many-petticoated replica of mid-1800s design, flooded the front seat with layers of pale blue satin and lace, though its neckline plunged dangerously low.

Her pout hardened into a frown as she stood in the street arranging her skirts. How had she let Steve talk her into this charade? Was it the crack about her sedate life-style?

'You're becoming boring, sis,' he had chided affectionately, lounging on the couch in her apartment. 'Whatever happened to your sense of adventure?'

'I focus all of it into my canvases,' she had returned.

'I'll pay you time and a half,' he offered.

Sara hesitated. She could use the money. Budget cuts at the school where she had been an art teacher had cost her her job. Unwilling to leave Charleston, she was now living on what she made from selling her paintings, supplementing that from her savings.

'And you've always wanted to see inside that house,' he continued.

'As an invited guest, not a gate-crasher,' she'd replied. 'And I don't understand why you can't use one of your own operatives.'

'Brad Garwood knows all my em-

ployees. This has to be done in the utmost secrecy.'

She had smiled at that. 'If someone had told me that my level-headed brother was going to start buying rumours about ghosts and curses I would have said they were crazy!'

'Let's just say I'm being cautious.'

Steve, eleven years her senior, had always been twice as protective of Sara as their late father, Ralph Manderly. For him to ask such a favour was out of character and she found it impossible to flatly refuse. 'Provided I can crash this high society party, what then?'

'Just keep an eye on Brad Garwood.'

'I'm not trained,' she warned.

'You're an artist. Who could be better at observation?'

'And what am I supposed to be observing?' She sighed resignedly and gave in.

'That I can't tell you, but if anything strikes you as odd or threatening, leave the house immediately. Once you're on the street, pretend you've turned your ankle. Sam will be close by. And remember, you should be inconspicuous, so try not to look too pretty.'

Sara had smiled. Big brothers were great for the morale. It wasn't that she was plain. She was an average-looking young woman who

could easily blend into a crowd. Still, something could go wrong. 'What if I get caught?'

'Lie!' he had commanded.

The urgency in his voice was still with her as she finished arranging her costume and moved swiftly along the dark, deserted side street.

Reaching the tip of the Battery, she crossed to the Sea Wall protecting the exclusive homes in this restored section of old Charleston from being flooded. Then she climbed a short flight of concrete steps to find herself gazing out over the moonlit surface of Charleston harbour.

This section of the harbour was now mostly a tourist attraction with such historic sites as Fort Sumter, Castle Pinckney and Morris Island among others to be visited by vacationers. During the day, visitors wandered along the Sea Wall under the warm South Carolina sun admiring the massive homes that spoke of an opulent era long past.

Not entirely, Sara corrected herself. The Fallons, whose party she was to crash, had money enough to live as well as any of the old Southern aristocracy.

Ahead of her, horse-drawn vehicles of various shapes and sizes stopped in front of a three-storey red brick residence to discharge passengers attired in period clothing similar to her own. Guests had to approach the house either in horse-drawn carriages or on foot—a tradition of this annual ball, and those invited cherished it deeply enough to comply.

Sara's plan was to pretend that after alighting from one of the carriages, she had taken a quick stroll along the Sea Wall before joining her companions inside.

From afar she had often admired the Fallon house. There was a stairway off the wall a few feet ahead of her which she planned to descend and then make her way across the street to the residence. However, when a carriage which had been obstructing her view of her entrance pulled away, her heart skipped a beat. Two liveried footmen stood on either side of the iron gate while a formidable butler guarded the front door checking invitations.

With a sigh Sara admitted defeat. Already aware of the exclusivity of this segment of Charleston society, she'd had doubts about being able to move among them undetected. Now, noticing a man looking at her from a corner window, she turned slowly and began to retrace her steps. She hated letting Steve down, but knew it was an outside chance.

Hurried footsteps sounded behind her.

'You mustn't be so quick to flee,' a male voice admonished.

She turned to face the slender blond man, not much older than herself, who had joined her on the Sea Wall. He wore the long waistcoat of the 1800s.

'I've been observing you for some time.' He smiled, the slight slur in his speech indicating mild intoxication.

'I wasn't fleeing,' she lied. 'I wanted some fresh air.'

He went on, 'I'm certain I've been introduced to every eligible female near my age, and yet I know we've never met.'

'I'm a distant cousin?' she suggested.

'I've met all of them too.' He laughed.

'Then I'm a ghost from the past and it's time for me to vanish.' Turning as she spoke, Sara moved away.

'I've never conversed with a ghost before,' he mused, falling into step beside her. 'Let me introduce myself. I'm Marc Fallon.'

She paused to face him. 'You're the one throwing the party.'

'No. My sister, Monica, is. I am simply a tolerant bystander.'

Sara caught a hint of disfavour in his tone. 'Don't you like dressing up?'

'I don't mind that, but my sister has pushed me to the limit. I'm dying to throw a wench into the proceedings.'

'You mean a wench,' Sara corrected.

'No—a wench.' He smiled mischievously. 'Consider it an effort to recapture the lost romance of the times. You can be the mysterious Southern belle who appears at the ball and afterward everyone discovers that no one knew who you were.'

'But you don't know anything about me,' she said.

'You aren't a jewel thief?' he demanded.

'No.' She smiled indulgently.

'Then I assume you're a reporter

from one of those yellow tabloids they sell in the grocery stores.'

Common sense told Sara to deny it. But she had made Steve a promise, and Marc Fallon was about to help her achieve her goal. 'Aren't you worried about becoming a social outcast once your association with me is discovered?' she asked.

'I'm a Fallon,' he reminded her, 'never an outcast. Besides, I'm also a cad. Once I have you inside, I plan to desert you to the wolves and see how you fare.'

'In that case, I accept,' said Sara. A triumphant smile lit his face.

'Then I insist we enter in style.' He hailed one of the empty carriages and, once she was seated, sat next to her. 'I seem to have been doing most of the talking,' he said, 'and I don't believe you've mentioned your name.'

'It's Sara.' She smiled.

But Marc shook his head. 'I shall call you Cindy—short for Cinderella. And I shall be your Fairy Godfather. I've provided you with a horse and carriage and am seeing that you get to the ball. You may remain as late as you like, but I'll warn you to stay away from my sister. There! Now I don't have to think of myself as a cad. Cinderella's Fairy Godmother didn't stay to protect her, after all.'

'Perhaps I'll find a Prince Charming to protect me,' she bantered.

'And perhaps I've miscast myself,' he mused. 'If only I wasn't so fearful of Monica's wrath.'

As Marc descended from the carriage and paused to help Sara, the

footmen looked startled, but neither spoke. The butler, obviously more experienced with his young employer's eccentricities, said only, 'Good evening, Mr. Marc.'

'Nice to see you again so soon, Blackwell.' Marc frowned. 'This is Cindy, a wandering ghost, whom you will not mention to my sister for fear of being haunted the rest of your days.'

'Yes, sir.' The man's manner held a touch of disapproval, and Sara flushed.

And Blackwell was only the beginning. In the entrance hall they were accosted by an elderly woman in gray lace that accented an emerald-and-diamond necklace.

'My goodness, Marc, who is this lovely young lady?' she asked.

'This is Cindy, Mrs. Leison, a distant cousin from Montana,' he quipped, then added, 'If you'll excuse me, I must find the bar. I haven't had a drink for nearly an hour.'

'That young man imbibes far too much,' Mrs. Leison said at his departing back.

'Yes,' Sara agreed, then, 'If you'll excuse me too, I want to powder my nose.' She moved toward the stairs.

On the second floor the room fronting on the harbour ran the entire width of the house and, with the furniture removed, provided an excellent area for dancing.

Sara had never met Brad Garwood, but Steve had shown her his photograph. His face, while not handsome, had been interesting, and

she wondered if his eyes were really as green as they appeared to be.

They were! She caught a flash of emerald as he moved across the dance floor with a slender black-haired beauty in his arms. The woman was smiling up at him, flirting playfully, and he was clearly enjoying the attention.

'Monica appears willing to go to any lengths to retain Cyprus Point,' a middle-aged woman remarked to her female companion. They were standing near where Sara was attempting to blend into the drapery.

'I wouldn't call marrying Brad Garwood "going to any lengths,"' the companion returned. 'If I were twenty years younger, it's a sacrifice I would be willing to make.'

'But he's a Yankee,' the other woman protested.

'And the war ended over a hundred years ago,' her companion countered.

'Hanna Fallon would turn over in her grave if she knew her granddaughter was being courted by a Yankee.'

'I will admit it's a good thing she's not alive to see the day a Yankee owns Cyprus Point,' the second woman conceded.

'Provided he survives to sign the papers.' The ominous tone made Sara shiver and redirect her full attention to the brown-haired man now leading his partner to the doorway.

The musicians were laying aside their instruments for a break. Before any attention could be directed toward her, Sara slipped from her cor-

ner. Following Brad Garwood and Monica Fallon at a discreet distance, she crossed the wide hallway and entered a large sitting room.

The couple had joined a small group of people, and Monica was introducing Brad Garwood to them. So he was not well-known among the guests—except by reputation, Sara amended.

Coming to a halt a few feet away, she found herself intrigued by the man's profile. Unexpectedly a pair of sea-green eyes fell on her, and she turned quickly away, flushing. She wasn't supposed to attract his attention.

Smiling at an elderly gentleman as if he were an old acquaintance, she accepted a drink from the tray of a passing waiter and edged her way toward the fireplace.

'Careful, Cindy,' Marc whispered, startling her. 'If I were you, I wouldn't stay too long in the same room with my sister.'

Sara smiled and hissed, 'I was just on my way out.'

Saluting her with his drink, he passed by.

Brad, meanwhile, had ordered bourbon on the rocks while Monica joined a group of women on the far side of the room. Brad had remained where he was talking earnestly to a man near his own age.

As Sara glanced toward him a final time it was to discover him watching her over his companion's shoulder. She quickly made her exit.

Each of the two large rooms had several windows opening on to a long, roofed porch and Sara decided

this was the safest place for her. The other couples who had wandered outside were so enthralled with one another that they paid her no heed and she blended in with the shadows.

When she was again able to observe Brad Garwood, Monica was leading him back to the dance floor. Curiously, as if he knew he was being watched, he glanced toward Sara, who ducked back quickly.

Crossing to one of the windows on the ballroom, she saw him dancing first with Monica and then with several other ladies as the dark-haired socialite danced with her other male guests. There was a virility about Garwood that struck her almost like a physical force. His skin was tanned a healthy copper. From Steve she knew that he was a talented architect. He was a big man, as tall as Steve and near his age, and his broad shoulders were evidence that he did not merely watch his labourers work.

Feeling smugly safe from observation, she was not worried when she lost track of her prey until a sudden warning sense caused her to glance toward the French doors. The man had passed through them and was moving toward her. The railing creaked as she shifted position slightly, feigning an intense interest in the darkened harbour below.

'The view is much better from inside.' His deep, gravelly tones sliced the air between them.

Sara turned slowly to face him and, smiling politely, said, 'I don't

think so. I can see Fort Sumter from here.'

'I'm not a man who enjoys playing games.' He scowled. 'You've been watching me all evening, and I find it a decidedly uncomfortable sensation.'

Steve had told her to lie, but she guessed a denial would do no good. She forced a smile. 'I apologise. But I do confess to observing you. I'm an artist and I find your face a very interesting study.'

Although his voice took on a gentler tone, it held a strong note of scepticism. 'I don't believe we've been introduced. I'm Brad Garwood.'

'I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Garwood.' She smiled. 'I'm Cindy, a distant cousin of the Fallons.'

'Cindy,' he repeated. 'Somehow you don't strike me as a "Cindy," but it would be ungallant of me to call so lovely a lady a liar. Instead, I'll ask you to dance.'

'I'm not really in the mood,' she managed.

'I insist.' Reaching out, he captured her hand.

The contact seemed almost to burn and Sara attempted to pull away. As she took a step backward, her full weight pressed against the wooden railing. Suddenly there was a sharp splintering sound as a portion of the structure gave way. Losing her balance, she would have fallen to the ground below except for Garwood's firm hold. As a shriek of terror escaped her lips, she found herself in the secure circle of his embrace, her arms wrapped

tightly around his solid form, and she had the sensation of being safe and protected. Then as other voices reached her brain, she flushed with embarrassment and, pushing away from him, managed to choke out a thank-you.

'Are you all right?' he questioned.

'Yes,' she murmured, meeting the velvet green of his eyes and suddenly feeling shaky all over again.

'Grandma must have had more gypsy blood in her than we ever knew,' Marc Fallon noted cryptically, materialising beside her. 'She always hated outsiders.'

Before Sara or Brad could react to this statement, Monica appeared.

'Cindy had a bit of scare,' Marc explained. 'And now I intend to take her inside and find her a brandy.'

'Cindy?' Monica's voice was a sharp question as Marc took Sara's hand and literally dragged her after him.

'I think perhaps it's time for Cinderella to flee the ball.'

'I think so, too,' she agreed. 'And thanks for the little added help, FG.' With a quick wink, she hurried away.

A man walking a dog on the Sea Wall quickened his pace, crossing the street ahead of her. 'I saw what happened,' he said in hushed tones. 'You all right?'

'I'm fine, Sam,' she assured him.

Twenty minutes later, as Sara climbed the rickety outside staircase to her second-floor apartment, the remembered sensation of falling as the railing gave way made her

shiver. This was followed by a deep fiery glow at the memory of Brad Garwood holding her.

Dismissing this reaction as the result of shock, she put on a kettle for tea. It had been a long evening.

She was unbuttoning the dress, when loud knocking interrupted her. Fastening the chain, she opened the door a crack to find Brad Garwood. 'Open the door,' he demanded.

'No!' She was holding the door with one hand and the dress in place with the other.

'I'm not leaving until I get some answers. I'll pound on your door all night, if that's what it takes.' The anger darkening his features told her that he meant it.

Sara sighed. She couldn't afford to let him make a racket. Her apartment was the second floor of a private residence with her landlady below. Although six months remained on her lease, the impending return of Mrs. Wynn's son and his wife meant she wanted to evict Sara for them. She had begun to profess an allergy to Sara's oil paints. If a friend came over for coffee she accused Sara of throwing wild parties, and she swore she'd have the phone disconnected if it rang after 9:00 p.m. Sara knew she was fighting a losing battle, but was determined to hold on. This was not only the cheapest place she could find in a decent neighbourhood, but it had come fully furnished. 'I have to close the door a minute to unfasten the chain,' she said.

'I warn you, I'm dangerous when provoked,' he growled when he en-

tered, slamming the door behind him as she backed away. 'You look like Scarlett O'Hara fearing she's about to be ravished by the enemy. Either go and change or refasten that dress.'

Brown fury flashed in Sara's eyes. 'I didn't invite you to come barging into my home...' Just then the kettle whistled, forcing her to go into the kitchen and switch off the stove. He was blocking the doorway when she turned to go out.

'You can wait in there.' She indicated the living room with a shrug of her shoulder as she walked down the hall to her bedroom.

Once there, she donned jeans and a T-shirt. Dressed normally, she felt more in control. Determined to insist that the man leave, she marched down to the living room, only to find that he was not there. He was not in the kitchen, either. Retracing her steps, she went into the room she used for a studio and found him standing in front of her easel examining an almost finished seascape.

'It would appear that being an artist is the only thing you didn't lie to me about...Sara Manderly.' He turned to face her, his expression black.

She decided to take the offensive. 'How did you find me?'

'When you left the house in such a rush I was close behind,' he replied. 'At first I only wanted to be certain you were capable of getting home safely. You'd been pretty shaken up. Then I spotted you talking to Sam and decided to follow

you. I'd parked my car down the block, and I was behind the wheel before you even collected your vehicle.'

'I see.' She met his angry stare with equal hostility.

'And now about you, Miss Manderly. I have a Chief of Security by that name. Are you related?'

'Steve's my brother.' She saw no sense in lying now.

'And unless Sam's moved recently, he travelled quite a distance to walk his dog.'

She turned away from the man and went back to the kitchen to make her tea. He came to stand in the doorway. 'Won't Monica be missing you?' She frowned.

'Monica has a houseful of guests. If she asks, I'll say you were a bit shaken up and I saw you home. Now, aren't you going to offer me a cup of tea?' he questioned drily.

'No.' Her response was firm. 'I want you to leave.' She was finding his presence increasingly disturbing.

'Not yet.' It was as if he was waiting for something.

Sara was watching him silently when a second loud knocking startled her, and she spilled the tea.

While she mopped up the counter, Brad answered the door. 'I've been here half an hour,' she heard him growl, 'I expected you sooner.'

'I was in bed when Sam called.' It was Steve.

Sara joined the men in the hall.

'And now I want a complete explanation of this evening's fiasco,' Brad said to Steve.

'I could use a cup of coffee.'

Steve smiled toward Sara as he led Brad into the living room.

'Then you can make it yourself,' she snapped.

Throwing her an exasperated glance, Steve motioned for Brad to be seated. 'Ever since you decided to purchase the Cyprus Point Plantation I haven't been able to rest easy,' he explained. 'I felt you needed someone to keep an eye on you, but I knew you wouldn't tolerate that, so I decided to do it covertly.'

'And you sent your sister?' Brad's voice was liquid ice.

'You know all of my other operatives,' Steve continued.

'What if she'd got caught sneaking in? Monica's not above having her arrested,' Brad demanded.

'I admit it was a calculated risk. Besides, she didn't sneak in,' Steve continued. 'According to Sam, she was escorted in by Marc Fallon.'

Brad turned to Sara. 'Does he know why you were there?'

'No.' She met his gaze squarely. 'He thought I was a reporter for one of the scandal sheets, and that it would be a great joke to foist me upon his sister.'

'I guess I should be grateful for that,' he growled, then turned back to Steve. 'Do you realise the damage you could have caused if anyone had got wind that my Chief of Security was worried about my personal safety? Any suspicion that I might not be around to fulfil my commitments, and my business could be in serious trouble.'

'I realise that,' Steve said. 'That's

why I didn't go outside our organisation.'

'I wasn't aware that your sister was on our payroll.' Brad's eyes travelled over her body as if memorising every detail for future reference.

'She isn't. Like I said before, you would have recognised one of my regulars, just as you recognised Sam.'

'So you sent a novice, and she was almost killed,' he scowled.

A look of remorse spread over Steve's features. 'I heard about the railing. I'm sorry, sis.'

'It's all right,' she assured him. 'But don't ask for any more favours!'

A flash of camaraderie passed between the two and Brad watched the interplay. 'I suppose no harm has been done. But I don't want a replay of this. If I'd known you could be taken in by ghost stories and rumours I would have thought twice about hiring you, Manderly.'

'It's not the ghost stories. It's the facts,' Steve defended himself. 'Two people have tried to buy Cyprus Point and both of them are dead.'

'One was an old woman with a serious heart condition and the other was an alcoholic who ran his car off a cliff. It was a coincidence that both were trying to purchase Cyprus Point.'

'Possibly...probably,' Steve admitted. 'But I had a gut instinct about the ball tonight. You're a Yankee, and for most of us Southerners, that's not a sin. But to those who consider themselves a part of

the old Southern aristocracy, your birthplace is a different matter. That bunch is so closed that your being invited to one of their gatherings was totally out of character.'

'For Pete's sake, is that what you were basing your suspicions on?' Sara demanded. 'He was invited because Monica Fallon has set her sights on him.'

'No kidding?' Steve glanced at Brad, a half smile on his face, while Brad raised an eyebrow.

In that moment Sara realised that, in spite of their heated exchange, the two men liked one another.

Suddenly the sound of knocking came from the inner door to the downstairs. Sara groaned. A visit from Mrs. Wynn was the last thing she needed tonight, but there she was, a look of triumph on her face.

'I refuse to put up with any more cars careening in and out of my driveway or men clopping around up here at all hours! Tonight has been the final straw! Be out of here by the end of the week or I'll have you arrested for disturbing the peace!'

Knowing that she would carry through with her threat, Sara said, 'All right, I'll move.'

'By the end of the week,' Mrs. Wynn repeated, then left, slamming the door behind her.

'I'm sorry, sis,' Steve apologised. 'I forgot you were having trouble.'

Sara had reached her breaking point. 'Just get out, both of you,' she commanded.

Brad Garwood moved toward the door, but Steve hung back. 'I'm

sorry, sis. You know you can come stay with Helen and me.'

'Out!' she snapped, and with a grimace he obeyed.

Mrs. Wynn had made it sound as if Sara had men callers every night, and as she locked the door it bothered her that Brad Garwood had got that impression. With a mental shrug she tried telling herself that it didn't matter, but for some reason it did. In fact she had a tremendous urge to cry. Deciding that she was simply tired and still a little shaken, she went to bed. Surely in the morning life would look brighter.

*

RIISING EARLY to catch the morning light, Sara again dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. Carrying a cup of coffee into her studio, she pulled on one of Steve's cast-off shirts that she used as a smock. The canvas on her easel needed only a few touch-up strokes to finish and then she could spend more time looking for a new place to live.

Her search, so far, had proved futile. Probably she would have to move in with Steve and Helen temporarily and this she hated to do. With two young children, her sister-in-law did not need an indefinite house guest.

The thought of going back to Florida to live with her mother flashed distastefully through her mind. It wasn't that she didn't love Ida—she simply couldn't put up with her interference, which had increased dramatically since her fa-

ther's death. At the moment, anyway, Ida was on a Mediterranean cruise.

But it wasn't only Ida. Sara had fallen in love with Charleston. Then there was her art. She had finally begun to gain a reputation locally. And then there was her niece and nephew. She would miss them terribly if she left. There were too many reasons to stay.

Curiously, with that thought in her mind, Brad Garwood's face crossed her consciousness. 'It's his features,' she muttered. 'They're artistically appealing to me.' Angrily she forced herself to concentrate on her work.

Finishing the painting, she left it to dry and started through the rental listings in the newspaper. Several phone calls later she was feeling totally depressed when someone knocked. Assuming it was Steve, she didn't bother with the chain.

'Good morning, Miss Manderly,' Brad Garwood's impersonal tones greeted her.

In the daylight, she wasn't certain if it was the green of his eyes or the sharp definition of his features that was the more fascinating. But only in an artistic sense, she qualified.

'Are you going to ask me in, or do we conduct our business on your doorstep?' he continued.

'I didn't know we had any business,' she said coolly.

Ignoring her manner, he entered, closing the door behind him. 'I want to apologise for the trouble I caused you last night. I'm sure finding an-

other place to live can be a nuisance.'

'You could call it that,' she replied, trailing after him. 'However, your apology is accepted. After all, I could have been seriously injured.'

'I'm glad you realise that.' He was regarding her with a darkly shuttered gaze. 'I gather you don't work for your brother on a regular basis.'

'I don't work for my brother at all,' she corrected. 'Last night was the first and last time I'll help him.'

He stared at her coolly, then said, 'Although I find your artistic skill to my liking, I believe it's difficult for an artist to support himself or herself on their art alone.'

'Excluding wealthy sponsors or a developed reputation, you're correct.' She caught the suggestive edge in his voice and flushed.

'Could it be you agreed to attend the ball last night because you thought you might meet a sponsor?'

'No!' She glared. 'I prefer to take care of myself.'

'And what exactly do you do to take care of yourself?'

'What do you think I do?' Sara challenged.

'I was wondering if you cooked.'

'Cooked?' She stared at him.

'I'm in need of a housekeeper,' he elaborated. 'No heavy cleaning—I have a service for that. But I need someone to see that the rooms are tidy, the laundry is done on time and to prepare meals.'

'I would think you could find any number of suitable people for the position,' Sara remarked.

'It's a live-in position,' he continued. 'There's a bedroom with a private bath off the kitchen. But I keep an irregular schedule.'

Sara had the distinct impression that they were discussing something quite different from cooking and cleaning.

'I'm willing to pay you six hundred dollars a month plus bed and board. You'll have Thursday evenings and every other weekend off. There's a room on the third floor with a skylight that you could use as a studio.'

'No, thank you,' she refused firmly, adding, 'don't you think this is a pretty steep price to pay as an apology? What will your friends think?'

'I rarely let what other people think influence me,' he replied coolly. 'However, since you refuse to cook and clean for me, perhaps we can work out a different arrangement.'

Erasing the distance between them with one long stride, he took her wrists and forced her arms behind her, moulding her to his long form.

As she started to protest, his mouth covered her parted lips, giving the kiss an immediate intimacy.

Panicked, she twisted against him, but he held her easily, and as the muscular impression of his thighs burned into her, the sensual excitement was stronger than anything she had ever experienced.

Involuntarily, her struggle, intended as a message of repulsion, seemed instead to be caressing him

in the most intimate manner. Terrified, she froze.

A low moan escaped his lips as he deserted her mouth to taste her neck.

'Let go of me!' she snapped.

Ignoring her demand, he kissed the pulse throbbing in her neck. 'I don't think that's really what you want.'

'Yes, it is,' she choked out, then kicked his shin as hard as she could with her bare foot. 'Ouch!' she cried, having inflicted more pain on herself than on him.

'If you're not careful, you're going to hurt yourself.' Brad Garwood frowned, and sat her down in a chair so as to examine her toe.

'I'll check my own injuries,' she snarled.

At a loud knocking on the door, Sara hobbled into the hall, to discover Steve on her threshold.

'Morning, sis,' he greeted her. 'Hurt your foot?'

'Stubbed my toe,' she replied.

Brad's expression hardened when he saw Steve. 'I thought I made it clear that I didn't want anyone following me.'

'You did, and I'm not,' Steve replied. 'I came by to see my sister, and I'm surprised to find you here.' His brotherly protectiveness made Sara cringe.

'I came to apologise for the trouble I caused her and to offer her a job as my housekeeper,' Brad said.

'I thought that was a live-in position.' Steve frowned.

'It is. However, I don't believe you have to worry. Cooking and

cleaning don't seem to appeal to your sister.'

'I assume you're going to turn down the offer,' Steve demanded.

'Actually, I haven't made up my mind yet,' she said, half out of rebellion at Steve's domineering manner.

Brad's eyebrow rose slightly, but he said nothing.

'I've talked to Helen,' Steve said sternly. 'She insists you come and stay until you can find a decent place to live.'

'That's impossible,' Sara said. 'You know I live on an erratic schedule. Trying to fit me into her life along with you and the children would be too much even for Helen. I won't risk our friendship.'

'It isn't proper for a young woman to be living alone with an unmarried man. I won't allow it!'

'You won't allow it? I'm of age!' she reminded him.

'You may be over twenty-one, but I still feel responsible for you,' Steve threw back.

'I'm responsible for myself,' she snapped. 'And I've decided to accept Mr. Garwood's offer.'

'Sara...' Steve's tone held a firm reprimand.

'I feel certain you have a desk waiting for you,' she interrupted, and led him to the door.

'Well, I won't be the one to tell Mom,' he muttered.

'Coward!' she snapped back, closing the door and quailing at the thought that Ida would ever get wind of this little charade.

Brad was standing behind her.

Now he lifted her hair and kissed her neck. 'When do you want to move in?' he murmured.

Swinging out of his reach, she turned to face him, her expression filled with fire. 'Tomorrow will be fine. But you'd better understand one thing—I'm to be your housekeeper and nothing more.'

His eyes narrowed dangerously.

'Just so we understand each other completely,' she continued acidly, 'I've always supported myself in a respectable manner and I intend to continue doing so. Until recently I had a teaching job, but because of budget cutbacks, I lost it at the end of last term. Since then I've been supplementing the money I earn from my art with my savings.'

'Why didn't you mention this before?' he growled. 'I would have thought that your experience last night would have taught you how dangerous playing games can be.'

'I didn't want to destroy your fun. You seemed to be enjoying the idea that I was promiscuous so very much,' she replied, then added, 'Does this mean you're withdrawing your offer?'

For a long moment they stood, like two combatants. It was Brad who broke the terse stillness. 'No,' he said stiffly. 'Unlike you, I don't play games. I offered you the job and it's yours.' With that, he turned and slammed out the door.

Sara stood immobile. She knew she should run after him and tell him that she hadn't actually meant ever to move into his house, but if she reneged now it would look as if she

didn't have a sincere bone in her body.

The rest of the day she spent packing, and late in the afternoon she took a load of paintings and a few sculptures over to the Grimes Gallery. Margarete Grimes had agreed to store them.

That night, as Sara lay in bed, the arguments continued to run through her mind, preventing sleep. If only Brad Garwood could have been an elderly woman instead of such a disturbingly virile male! Arrogant, and ill-tempered, too. She grimaced.

And how was she ever going to explain this situation to her mother? 'I'll tell her it's an honest living and that I'm getting paid for what women have done for nothing for years,' she muttered. 'Well, I won't put it exactly that way,' she amended, falling into a restless sleep.

CRAWLING out of bed the next morning, Sara made coffee and reconsidered her position. Maybe it would work out all right if she moved in with Steve and Helen for a short time. She could help Helen with the housework and be a live-in babysitter. Still, she hated to accept that solution.

A knock on the door interrupted this mental debate. Answering it, she was startled to find Brad Garwood on her doorstep dressed in jeans and a pullover.

'I've come to help you move,' he announced. 'I couldn't get any work done, worrying about you falling

down that ridiculous excuse for a staircase on the outside of this building. The thing should be condemned!

This was her final chance to tell him she had changed her mind, but the words would not come.

Noticing her hesitation, he added blandly, 'The question is where do I move you to? Are you still planning to accept my offer, or have you decided to stay with your brother?'

'I would hope she's coming to stay with us.' Steve joined them via the still-open door.

The word *yes* formed in her brain, but the word *no* came out. Shocked at her duplicity, she told herself it was a backlash reaction to Steve's domineering attitude.

Brad's stoic acceptance of her decision did not surprise her. Steve's did. 'As long as I'm here, I might as well help with the move.' He frowned.

'Life,' she muttered, 'can be very confusing!'

This conjecture was further strengthened on her arrival at Brad's home. It was a three-storey, red brick structure in the old section of Charleston, near the Fallon residence.

To Sara's delight, it had a double-tiered piazza running the length of the house. And as she parked behind Brad in the driveway, the sight of an elegant aged magnolia greeted her. Suddenly a sense of arriving at a place where she belonged swept over her.

'It's just the charm of this old residence,' she reasoned, 'and I've al-

ways loved piazzas and magnolias.' Still the impression lingered.

Walking through the back door behind Brad, she found herself in a large, spacious kitchen. An open door on her left revealed a bedroom, and here he placed her suitcase. The room was furnished in antique maple with patchwork curtains and a matching bedspread. The walls were white while the carpeting and woodwork were a pale yellow. 'I admire your decorator's taste,' she said with enthusiasm.

'It does suit you,' he murmured, then added stiffly, 'I chose the furnishings myself.'

'Then it's your taste I admire,' she said.

Entering the kitchen loaded down with art supplies, Steve interrupted the heavy silence between them. 'Where do these go?'

'Third floor, first door on your right,' Brad instructed, heading back out to his car for another load.

The promised studio was perfect. The skylight was large and centred, flooding the room with sunlight.

Brad entered carrying the aluminium table she used for her messier supplies.

'You ever consider putting in an elevator?' Steve demanded as the two men unfolded the long table and set it up.

'After today I might.' Brad laughed.

Sara realised that this was the first time she had actually heard Brad Garwood laugh.

A couple of trips later, she was arranging the materials in her studio

when Steve came in with more, followed by Brad with two sculptures.

'That's it,' her brother announced, looking around. 'I wonder if an artist lived here before. This room looks as if it was built for one.'

'I had the skylight put in,' said Brad, an indefinable edge to his voice. 'There's one in my workroom, too. I was going to knock out the adjoining wall, but I never got around to it,' he explained.

Steve glanced at his watch. 'Time I got back to the office.' The glance he threw at Brad suggested he thought his boss should be leaving, too.

'I'll be in a little later,' said Brad.

'Right, boss,' Steve replied. 'I'm going to assign two more men to The Pines' site.'

'Fine,' Brad agreed, a note of dismissal in his voice.

Sara knew that this townhouse community outside Charleston was Brad's newest independent project.

'Are you having trouble at The Pines?' she asked, feeling suddenly very alone with the man now that Steve was gone.

'One of our Caterpillars ended up in the lake last night. Probably just a couple of kids out for a joyride, but Steve thought it wouldn't hurt to add a little extra security for a couple of days.'

'He's a very cautious man,' Sara commented.

'I know. That's why I hired him. Sometimes, however...' His features darkened momentarily.

Feeling a desperate need to es-

cape the man's scrutiny, Sara stood up. 'I don't know about you, but I'm starved. Since I'm now the cook and it's lunchtime, I'll see what I can find to whip up.'

'Make it sandwiches,' he directed. 'I have plenty of cold cuts and very little else.'

'All right.' She started down the stairs, only to discover he was following her.

'I've set up a household account,' he explained. 'If you'll sign this card, I'll drop it off at the bank and you can start writing cheques today.'

She did as requested, but as she accepted the cheque book he handed her, their fingers touched, and she jerked away. There was an intimacy about being alone with this man she could not deny, and it gave her serious second thoughts.

His mouth hardened into a tight line as he hooked his hands into his pants pockets and continued to watch her.

'What kind of sandwich would you like?' she asked.

'Ham and Swiss,' he returned curtly.

His eyes never shifted from her, and by the time she poured his coffee her nerves were taut. Picking up the plate with the sandwich, she carried it and the coffee into the dining room. For a moment Brad looked as if he was going to protest his ostracism from the kitchen table, then he sat down.

'Do you want milk or sugar for your coffee?' she offered.

'Neither,' he replied.

With a nod, she left. Back in the kitchen she made herself a sandwich, but it tasted like cardboard. She did not understand what was happening to her, and this frightened her. Never had she been so keenly aware of a man. With Steve's departure, the reality of her situation was becoming more and more acute. Angrily shoving her plate away, Sara chided herself for overreacting.

DURING the summers Sara minded her niece and nephew one day a week. When Helen came by a few days later to drop them off, her eyes were filled with curiosity. 'Steve's not pleased with this arrangement, but he's not as opposed to it as I thought he would be,' she said, inspecting Sara's bedroom and bath. 'This is really nice. Much better than that apartment you were in.'

'True,' Sara agreed.

'Be back around three,' Helen said, and soon drove off.

'What are we going to do today?' Tommy demanded.

Sara smiled at her nine-year-old nephew. 'I thought you two could make kites while I do some sculpting,' she replied.

'Excellent!' Tommy exclaimed.

'Yes, excellent!' Joanie copied her older brother.

The door of Brad's workroom was open, and as they reached the landing, he came out to meet them. 'What's so excellent?' He smiled.

'We're going to make kites,' Joanie informed him.

'This is my niece, Joanie, and my

nephew, Tommy.' Sara introduced them. 'Children, this is Mr. Garwood.'

'So you're the man my aunt is living with.' Tommy frowned.

Sara flushed scarlet. 'I'm living in Mr. Garwood's home, but I'm not living *with* him,' she corrected.

'Does that mean you're married?' Joanie pouted. 'You promised I could be in your wedding when you got married.'

'I've already told you they're not married,' Tommy said. 'That's why no one wants to be the one to tell Grandma Ida.'

'Why don't we forget about Grandma and go make your kites?' Sara suggested, dragging both children down the hall, followed by a pair of thoughtful green eyes.

After a while, Brad wandered in to see what progress the children were making. 'Where do you plan to take them to try out their kites once they're finished?' he asked.

'I hadn't thought about it,' Sara replied.

'I have to run out to The Pines for a while. If you'd like to pack a picnic lunch, there's a large open space in the park out there they could use,' he offered.

Sara's first inclination was to decline, but both Tommy and Joanie immediately began pleading with her to accept.

Thus it was that a little over an hour later, she sat on a blanket across the remains of a picnic lunch from Brad Garwood, watching her niece and nephew trying to launch their creations.

The breeze caught her hair and sent a strand over her face. Reaching across, Brad brushed it back behind her ear. For a second her heart seemed to stand still as their eyes met and his hand traced the line of her jaw. Then abruptly he broke the contact and in the same motion stood up. 'I did come out here to check on a few matters,' he announced. 'I'll be back to take you all home in a little while.'

When they returned to town, Brad paused at 'the house only long enough to drop them off. Then, after asking for dinner at seven, he left for his office. She greeted his departure with a sigh of relief. Helen was due back soon, and she could be even more blunt than the children.

As Sara suspected, Helen intended to be blunt about the present situation. 'It's a beautiful house,' she said, 'but living here alone with Brad Garwood is sure to cause gossip. If nothing else, you should consider Ida's reaction. She'll never forgive any of us.'

'I know,' Sara admitted.

'You can move in with us,' Helen finished.

'I don't think that will be necessary,' Sara refused. 'I'm sure I can find a place, and I'll start looking right away.'

After Helen and the children had left, she started dinner, then wandered aimlessly around the house. Her sister-in-law was right. She had known almost from the beginning that she could not remain under Brad Garwood's roof. Still, she was

filled with deep regret. 'I'm being ridiculous,' she muttered. 'Ever since the ball I haven't been myself. I should never have moved in here in the first place.'

'You're muttering to yourself.'

Brad startled her as he entered the room. 'What's the problem?'

'I wasn't mut—' Whirling around, Sara started to deny the accusation, then stopped herself. 'Yes, I was muttering. I can't stay here. It was foolish of me to agree to be your housekeeper. I hadn't honestly considered all the consequences.'

Expecting a sarcastic response, she was surprised when he nodded. 'When do you want to leave?'

'I can move in with Helen and Steve tomorrow.'

'I'm not anxious to be rid of you, Sara.' He frowned. 'I only want you to do what you feel is right for you.'

'Fine,' she muttered, and went downstairs to finish dinner.

The phone rang around nine. Sara started to answer it, but when it stopped in the middle of the second ring she knew Brad had picked it up. Then a knock sounded on the studio door. 'That call was from one of the residents at The Pines,' Brad said tersely. 'She saw some kids sneaking into an unfinished unit near hers. I've alerted security and I'm going out there myself. I want you to call Steve and tell him to meet me there.'

'Of course,' Sara replied coolly, then in an anxious tone, 'Be careful.' Why she had said it, she did not know.

'I'll be back soon,' he promised.

After calling Steve and relaying

the message, Sara returned to her studio, but she could not work. She didn't know why she felt apprehensive, but there was no denying that she did.

It was nearly midnight when a car finally pulled into the drive. Hearing Steve's voice, she walked out to the landing. Her brother was accompanying a bloodied, bandaged Brad up the stairs.

'What happened?' she choked out.

'Seems some idiot in a truck drove out of a dirt side road right in front of Brad,' Steve explained.

'I swerved to miss him and went into a ravine,' Brad finished.

'The doctor gave him something for the pain' Steve said. 'I'm going to put him to bed. I'll need some ice packs for his wrist.'

'I'll fix them right now,' she said.

Back upstairs, she discovered Brad already asleep, his face pale and drawn. Carefully she arranged the ice around his wrist, then took her brother's arm and led him out of the room. 'Just how badly is he hurt?'

'Not really badly,' he assured her. 'He has a few stitches under those bandages on his face and his wrist is badly sprained, but he got off easy. You should see the car!'

'What happened to the other driver?'

'Nothing. Didn't even stop to help.' Steve shook his head angrily. 'It was probably a bunch of drunken kids. They use those old side roads for their drinking parties.'

'Probably,' she muttered softly,

her uneasiness still strong. 'Where did it happen?'

'Just south of The Pines.' Steve had started down the stairs and Sara followed. 'Now, why don't you make me some coffee while I call Helen and tell her I won't be home tonight.'

'Are you going back out to The Pines?' she questioned.

'No, I'm staying here.'

'There's no reason to.' She frowned. 'I can take care of Brad.'

'It's not proper for you to be running in and out of his bedroom.'

Throwing him an exasperated glance, she said, 'With Brad in his condition, I'm sure I'll be perfectly safe.'

Steve smiled. 'He told me that you'd decided to move out tomorrow. Said you were concerned about your reputation. I'm glad you finally came to your senses.'

'I was going to,' Sara admitted, 'but I can't now. He'll need someone to look after him for a few days. Besides, that will give me time to find a place of my own.'

'Just promise me you'll be out of here by the time Mom hits town,' Steve said.

'I promise,' Sara replied.

'You call me if you need any help,' Steve told her.

'I'm sure I can manage,' she stated, waving him on his way.

'Brad should have one of those pain pills in ten minutes,' he called back as he climbed into his car.

Waving to say she had heard, Sara closed the door.

A few minutes later when she

went into Brad's bedroom, his eyes opened. 'Where's Steve?' He scowled.

'I sent him home to his wife and children,' she replied. 'I may not be an expert on first aid, but I can give you a couple of pills and arrange ice packs.'

'What about the vandals at The Pines?'

'They left without doing any damage, Steve says,' she told him coolly. 'And now it's time for you to have a pill, then I'm going to change the ice bags.'

Back in her own room, Sara changed into her nightgown and crawled into bed, but sleep would not come. Finally, giving in to an uncontrollable urge, she pulled on a robe and went upstairs to Brad's bedroom. Walking stealthily over to the bed, she gazed down on his sleep-relaxed features. The velvet softness of his eyes when he had held her following her near-fall and her strong physical reaction to his touch haunted her. Then she recalled the ice in those same eyes when he had accused her of lying and his arrogance when he had propositioned her. 'It just can't be true,' she muttered, and fled the room. 'I can't be in love with Brad Garwood!'

*

SARA WAS still denying any emotional involvement the next day when the doorbell rang in the middle of the afternoon. Forgetting to remove her smock, she opened the

door to find herself face-to-face with Marc and Monica Fallon.

Marc was the first to recover. 'We heard about the accident and came over to see how Brad's getting along.'

'But if he's busy, we don't want to disturb him.' Monica was stiffly polite.

'Please come in,' Sara requested, though she found the gleam in the man's eyes disconcerting. Monica had not recognised her, but Marc had obviously placed her at once.

'Who may I say is calling?' she asked.

'Monica and Marc Fallon,' Marc responded pleasantly, apparently willing to play the game, at least for now.

Excusing herself to announce their presence, Sara turned toward the stairs, only to almost collide with Brad. 'The Fallons are in the living room,' she managed.

'So I heard.' He frowned. 'Please prepare some coffee for Marc and myself. Monica will take tea.'

'Yes, sir.' Sara was past him and down the steps before he entered the room where his guests waited. After turning the water on to boil and starting a fresh pot of coffee, she went into her room to run a brush through her hair. Before carrying the refreshments upstairs she exchanged the smock for a pinafore-style apron that covered her T-shirt and half of her jeans.

'I know it's none of my business, because once you own the property, you can do with it what you wish,' Monica was saying as Sara walked

into the living room, 'but I'm curious to know what you plan for Cyprus Point.'

'You have every right to ask,' Brad assured her. 'Cyprus Point has been in your family for centuries. I plan to renovate it, keeping as much of the original structure as possible, and then move into it as my personal residence.'

'I'm so glad!' Monica smiled up at him. 'It's a wonderful place to raise a family. I recall my childhood there with intense delight.'

'Everyone to their own poison,' Marc muttered. Then he said, 'Actually, Father was furious when he heard about the accident. He's afraid old Hanna's curse is going to prevent him from ever selling the place.'

'Marc, really!' Monica flushed.

'I didn't know there was a curse,' said Brad.

'Oh, yes. Father swore us to secrecy, but since there've been two deaths already and now you've had a very close call, I suppose there's no harm in telling,' Marc mused.

'Marc, I really don't think Brad is interested in a dying woman's ravings,' Monica attempted to stop him.

'Of course he is,' Marc assured her. 'He's trying to buy Hanna's sacred little kingdom. On her deathbed, she cursed any outsider who would attempt to make Cyprus Point his home.'

The sensation of dread Sara had been experiencing returned with renewed force.

'Marc, you're embarrassing me!'

Monica protested. 'No one believes in curses and superstitions today.'

'I'd suggest that Brad might consider the possibility,' Marc's eyes went from the wrapped wrist to the bandaged face.

'Tea, Miss Fallon?' Sara broke the stilted silence. Monica was right. Curses and superstitions belonged in a different age. Still...

'Yes, please,' the dark-haired woman replied.

'Of course, you could possibly ward off the curse by marrying Monica right away,' Marc suggested. 'Though considering dear old Hanna's aversion to Yankees, she might consider my sister better off a widow.'

'I don't enjoy your insinuation that Brad would marry me to ward off a curse,' Monica frowned.

'You're much too beautiful to be associated with any curse,' Brad assured her gallantly.

'Coffee or tea, Mr. Fallon?' asked Sara. She told herself that she didn't care what Brad Garwood did or said, but the lie crumbled. She felt as green as his eyes.

'I'd prefer something a bit stiffer. It's after twelve.'

'Bourbon?' Brad asked.

'Straight,' Marc stipulated, concentrating on Sara. Then, 'I don't believe you've introduced this most charming addition to your household,' Marc said. 'Don't tell me that blue jeans are the newest uniform for nurses.'

'Sara Manderly is my temporary housekeeper,' Brad replied. 'She's an artist, and when she lost her

apartment I offered her a position until she could find new quarters.'

'How very gallant of you.' Marc smiled. 'I suppose fledgling artists do find it difficult to live on their work alone.'

'You do look familiar,' Monica broke in. 'Perhaps I've seen you at an exhibition.'

'Perhaps,' Sara managed.

'Do you have a gallery?' Marc enquired.

'Some of my works are on display at the Grimes Gallery,' Sara replied. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I do have dinner to prepare.'

Brad nodded his dismissal and she was gone before either of the Fallons could ask any more questions.

AFTER a restless night, Sara awoke to the smell of bacon frying and coffee perking. Dressing hurriedly, she went into the kitchen to find Brad breaking eggs into the skillet. The table was set for two.

'I would have made your breakfast,' she said. 'You're still supposed to use your wrist as little as possible.'

'My wrist feels much better,' he professed, while doing nearly everything one-handed. 'Besides, it's Saturday and this is your weekend off.' As he dished up the eggs, he added, 'I made enough for two. Will you join me?'

Hesitantly, Sara sat down at the table. The back door was open, letting in the soft scent of lilac from the garden.

'I'm not a bad cook,' Brad assured her.

'It looks delicious,' she murmured, confused by his attentiveness. But not for long.

'I've been thinking,' he said between bites. 'I'll be closing the deal on Cyprus Point this week. As soon as the papers are signed I plan to move out there to direct the renovations, leaving this house unoccupied. You could stay on here as a sort of caretaker. Someone should be here to look after the place.'

'You don't have to move out of your home to be rid of me. I'm sure I'll find something this weekend and be gone by the middle of the week.' Sara rose awkwardly, anger holding back her tears.

'Damn it, Sara!' Brad caught her by the shoulders. 'You've got this all wrong.'

'I apologise for overreacting,' she said. 'I realise that you only want to clear the way for your wife.'

'Your being in this house, with me at Cyprus Point, won't interfere—'

'That's impossible,' she interrupted. 'People will say I'm your in-town mistress!' Twisting out of his grasp, she ran into her room, grabbed the newspaper and her handbag and stormed out.

She slammed the back door and climbed into her car. Brad Garwood had her on an emotional roller coaster and she intended to get off as soon as possible.

By noon she was feeling thoroughly depressed. The only reasonable place she had found was not

available yet. Stopping by the house, she found a note from Brad saying that he had gone to pick up his car and that Margarete Grimes had called.

Pouring herself a glass of orange juice, Sara dialled the number for the gallery.

Margarete was absolutely bubbling. 'You must have made quite a conquest,' she teased.

'Conquest?' Sara questioned.

'Marc Fallon was waiting outside when I opened up this morning,' Margarete said. 'Why didn't you tell me you knew the Fallons?'

'I don't know them well,' Sara defended.

'Well, Marc bought every piece of your work I had. Even the ones you had asked me to store, both paintings and sculptures.'

'Every one?' Sara repeated, too stunned to think.

'Yes, dear. Now it's imperative that you bring me more. Once he hangs his, other customers will be looking for your work.'

'I'll get back to you,' Sara managed, hanging up. Then she stormed out of the house.

By the time she reached the Fallon home, her anger had reached the stage of a red fury, so that the butler looked dubiously into her flushed face when she asked for Marc.

Returning a few minutes later, he informed her that Marc would see her in the upstairs sitting room.

'Sara!' Marc greeted her joyfully as she entered to find him surrounded by her paintings and sculptures.

Monica was there too. 'Miss Manderly.' She received Sara with a quiet smile. 'It seems that my brother is quite taken with your work, though I'm not sure we have space for all of these.'

'There's no need to worry,' Marc assured her. 'I'll give a few away to some of our closest friends. It will soon be the in thing to have a Manderly hanging in one's home.'

'That's what I've come to talk to you about,' Sara's anger was too intense not to show.

'Miss Manderly seems upset with you, brother dear,' Monica remarked. 'Since I prefer to remain out of your personal squabbles, I hope you'll excuse me.'

'Of course.' Marc nodded at her departure.

Pausing beside Sara, Monica whispered, 'Don't be too rough on him. I'm afraid the tendency to go overboard like this is a family trait.'

Sara's anger faded a fraction. In spite of her jealousy she had to admit that Monica had class. Matching her with the sister Marc had described on their first encounter was impossible, but then Marc's view of the world was shaded by bourbon and his eccentricities. 'I'll try: not to,' she promised.

Monica nodded and closed the door.

'You can't buy up all my works!' Sara began.

'And why not?' Marc asked, walking to the liquor cabinet to pour himself a drink. 'They were for sale.'

'Yes, but...'

'All great artists had sponsors,' he interrupted. 'Knowing the right people helps.'

'I prefer to make it on my talent alone,' Sara returned.

'In the end, you will,' he said, raising his glass in salute. 'I'm merely giving you a nudge in the right direction, bringing you out into the limelight, so to speak.'

'I want you to promise me that you won't buy any more of my work,' she insisted. 'Even if you could promote me into the limelight for the rest of my life I'd never be certain if it was my art people wanted or that they'd merely been duped into a fad. I can't accept a success based on someone else's manoeuvres.'

'All right, all right!' Marc held up a hand. 'But I still refuse to return any of my purchases. I've grown much too fond of them. Now, will you have dinner with me tonight?'

'I appreciate the offer, but the answer is no,' she refused.

'Think of it as Prince Charming attempting to make amends,' he said.

'You can make amends by not pulling another stunt like this,' she said, heading out the door.

'Think of...' he began again as she closed it securely behind her. Eccentrics held no interest for her.

'So far this day has gone from bad to worse,' she muttered during the drive home, adding, 'and worsen,' when she spotted Margarete's silver Buick parked in front of the house. Brad's car was there, too.

Inside, she found both of them upstairs in her studio.

'This bust of Mr. Garwood is coming along marvellously,' Margarete effervesced.

'Thank you.' Sara forced a smile.

Brad remained silent, but Sara felt his hostility.

Margarete, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to it.

'You didn't say when you would bring more paintings,' she continued. 'So I thought I'd prod you with this cheque.'

It was for a substantial sum. 'Thank you,' Sara managed.

'You're so lucky to have a Fallon for a sponsor.' The woman sighed. 'Now I must rush. Are these four paintings all right for me to take along?'

'Yes,' Sara confirmed. 'I'll help carry them to your car.'

'Are you going to tell me what's going on, or do I have to guess?' Brad's icy tones met Sara as she went back into the house.

'There's nothing to tell. Marc simply bought all of my works that Margarete had in the gallery.'

'And why would he do that?' he asked.

'Maybe he likes my work,' she retorted.

'And maybe he's decided to play your angel. Now tell me, what does he expect in return?'

'He doesn't expect anything! And he's not going to pull this kind of a stunt again.' She glared. 'I've just come from his home. I told him I didn't want his help with my career, and he agreed.'

'Marc Fallon can be very persistent and very charming when he sees something or someone he wants,' Brad warned bluntly.

Suddenly, uncontrollably, slow hot tears began to trickle down her cheeks. 'You don't think I'm any good as an artist!' she accused. 'That's what this is all about, isn't it? You don't think anyone could buy my paintings simply because they like them!'

Drawing an angry breath, he pulled her gently into his embrace. 'That's not true,' he denied. 'I like your work very much. In fact, there's a painting upstairs I want for my workroom. I told Margarete it was already promised to me.'

'Honestly?' Sara stammered.

'Honestly,' he replied, still holding her. 'Now, I want you to promise me that you'll be careful about Marc Fallon. He's not the type of man you should associate with.'

His words brought her back to reality, and she pushed away from him. 'Thank you for your concern, but I can take care of myself,' she flared. 'If I need any more brotherly advice, I'll call Steve!'

'Sara.' He stood staring at her indecisively, then growled, 'I've got work to do,' and stalked out.

The flowers began to arrive shortly after she had started dinner. The first arrangement was all red roses with a card from Marc begging her to forgive him. The second was yellow roses with a similar card. When the doorbell rang a third time, Sara made up her mind to put a stop to this.

'Please, take them back,' she told the delivery boy.

'I can't do that,' he said. 'They've already been paid for.'

'All right,' she conceded. 'But this is the last. Agreed?'

'No, ma'am,' the boy said. 'I have several more in the truck for you.'

Ten minutes later she was standing in the hallway with the fourth bouquet, pink roses this time, when the doorbell rang again.

'Are you Miss Sara Manderly?' an elderly man enquired politely.

'Yes,' she answered dubiously.

'Mr. Fallon asked me to deliver this to you.' He smiled, extending a beautifully wrapped package. 'I hope you enjoy them.'

Closing the door, Sara stood staring at the gift. It was a five-pound box of very expensive chocolates. 'I didn't even know they made a box this big,' she mused.

'What's going on?' Brad demanded.

'Apparently Marc Fallon still thinks I'm angry with him,' Sara explained tersely.

'To a bystander like myself it would appear that the man is attempting to do more than simply apologise.'

'I can handle this myself, thank you,' Sara glared back.

'Then see if you can put a stop to these constant interruptions,' he requested acidly, heading back to his workroom.

'I'm trying,' she muttered.

Marc called a few minutes later. 'Am I truly forgiven?' he asked.

Sara considered telling him that she would never forgive him if he didn't stop the flowers. Her intuition, however, warned her against this. 'I've told you that you're forgiven,' she replied.

'Then you will have dinner with me?' he asked.

Glancing over her shoulder, Sara saw Brad enter, and caught his expression of disapproval. Suddenly the image of Monica Fallon flashed into her mind and in a moment of defiant, jealous anger, she accepted.

'I thought we would go to the Sunday-evening dinner and dance at the yacht club,' Marc was saying. 'I'll be by to pick you up at six-thirty.'

THE DRESS Sara wore was one of her favourites. It was a lightweight, multicoloured creation of blues, pinks and purples with a form-fitting bodice, discreet neckline and puff sleeves. The full, tiered skirt was knee-length.

'You look absolutely delicious,' Marc greeted her. Then as he handed her a florist's box containing a wrist corsage made of white rosebuds, his eyes travelled over her shoulder and he added, 'Evening, Brad.'

'Evening, Fallon,' Brad returned.

Sara knew without a doubt that he had followed her downstairs to check on Marc's condition, and she bristled. As she walked beside her escort to his car, she could feel Brad's eyes on her.

'I thought Brad was going to ask

me how much I'd had to drink before I came to pick you up,' Marc quipped as they reached the yellow sports car.

'How many have you had?' she asked.

'Only two since lunch. You have a very sobering effect on me, lovely. However, why don't you chauffeur us?' he suggested, extending the keys.

'I've always wanted to drive a Jaguar,' she said, accepting the offer with relief.

Arriving at the club, Sara discovered that the sobering effect was short-term. As soon as they were seated he began to drink.

To make matters worse, the sense of dread she had been experiencing over Brad's safety had returned, making her edgy and tense.

The waiter was bringing Marc his third before-dinner cocktail when Sara felt a prickling sensation on the back of her neck and intuitively knew that Brad was in the room.

'Good evening, Miss Manderly, Marc,' said Monica as she and Brad paused at their table.

'Good evening, Miss Fallon,' Sara returned, sensing a hidden anger in the woman and guessing that Monica's understanding nature was wearing thin.

'Don't let Monica upset you.' Marc winked mischievously as the other couple moved out of earshot. 'She's still a bit snippy about the ball.'

'You mean about the railing coming loose? I'm sorry if I dampened the party,' Sara said, then demanded

anxiously, 'She hasn't recognised me, has she?'

'No, and as for the railing, it was inconsequential to my sister... except for the sudden loss of Brad's presence for a time.'

'Then I don't understand why Monica is upset,' Sara said. 'I thought all the guests seemed to be enjoying themselves.'

'But it was not at Cyprus Point,' said Marc.

'Your family still owns Cyprus Point,' Sara said. 'Why didn't Monica have the ball there this year, if it was so important to her?'

'Our father wouldn't allow it.' Marc's expression darkened. 'He hates Cyprus Point. Or more accurately, he hated his mother, and the place reeks of her. You see, old Hanna never approved of Monica's and my mother. She told her she wasn't good enough to bear a child of Halloway blood. After one of their confrontations, my mother went driving to blow off steam and died in a car crash. My father never forgave Hanna and refused to set foot in Cyprus Point ever again.'

'Then why did she leave the plantation to him?'

The waiter arrived with their salads and Marc waited to answer. 'She had no choice,' he said. 'My grandfather knew that Hanna loved Cyprus Point as deeply as my father had loved my mother. As a punishment for the accident or maybe because he knew that Hanna had only married him to keep Cyprus Point, he set up his will so that she had the use of the place during her lifetime,

but on her death it would go to my father. Still, Hanna tried. She knew my father would sell the place as soon as she was gone so she worked on Monica and me. She tried to make us love the place as much as she did.'

'And do you?' Sara questioned.

'Not with old Hanna's ghost hanging around.' A crooked smile curved Marc's mouth. 'I think that's really why Father refused to let Monica have the ball there. He didn't want any more ghost stories to circulate. Last year one of our guests swore she saw Hanna standing at the top of the stairs. It caused quite a stir.'

'And what about Monica? I gather she's still very attached to the place.'

'Yes, Hanna was successful there. My sister will even marry a Yankee to retain the family home.'

The chiding quality in Marc's voice provoked Sara. 'Marrying Brad Garwood isn't a sacrifice,' she retorted, then wished she hadn't as Marc's eyes flashed. He had laid a trap and she had fallen into it.

During the meal she kept the conversation on less personal ground. Marc insisted on having champagne with the main course, and drank nearly two full bottles, while Sara had three glasses.

'I'm not in the mood for dancing,' Marc announced as the waiter cleared away. 'Why don't I take you for a moonlight cruise on our yacht?'

'I don't think so.' She rejected the offer.

'I insist on at least showing it to you. It's my favourite toy.' He was rising. Sara smiled demurely and followed.

Amazingly, he moved through the crowded room without incident. As they left, she saw several large and medium-sized yachts moored along a wide wooden pier.

'I really think we should be going home,' she suggested as he guided her along the plank surface.

'After you see *Wandering Lady*.' He was adamant.

'Marc, where are you going?' Monica's voice sounded from behind them and Sara breathed a sigh of relief. 'Surely you and Miss Manderly were not planning to go for a sail?'

'My dear sister, may I remind you that we're both past the age of consent.' Marc's manner was provocative.

'You're in no condition...' Brad growled.

'No Yankee is going to tell me what condition I'm in!' Marc interrupted. Releasing Sara, he balled his hands into fists and drew his arm back.

Anticipating the blow, Brad blocked the punch, and Marc's swing caught Sara in the eye. Losing her balance, she staggered backward, hit the water and went under. She surfaced to find Brad in the water beside her forcing a life preserver into her arms.

'Is she all right?' Monica was calling. 'Shall I get help?'

'I'm fine,' Sara managed to choke out.

'Sara, I'm truly sorry,' Marc apologised from the pier.

'Next time I'll remember to duck,' she muttered.

'There won't be a next time,' Brad growled, guiding her to a ladder Monica had lowered from the yacht.

Brad insisted on taking her home. As soon as they were in his car and on their way home, he demanded, 'What in the hell did you think you were doing on the pier with that man?'

'Don't curse at me,' she retorted. 'I wouldn't have got on the yacht!'

'How in the world did you survive this long on your own?' he growled.

'I was doing just fine until I became associated with you and your friends,' she returned hotly.

'Marc Fallon is not one of my friends.'

'Monica is,' she pointed out sharply.

'Sara!' His voice held a warning note.

Arriving back at the house, she was out of the car and on her way to the door before he had turned off the engine.

By the time she climbed out of the shower, she was beginning to feel almost relaxed until she caught sight of herself in the mirror. A dark circle was already starting to form around her eye. Groaning aloud, she blew her hair dry. Then dressing in a light, short nightgown, she pulled a robe on over it and went out into the kitchen to fix herself an ice pack.

Brad, showered and dressed in a

fresh pair of slacks and a knitted pullover, moved toward her. 'Let me see what damage has been done.'

She turned in his direction.

'I should have slugged Fallon.' He scowled.

'Please, not while I'm in receiving distance,' she said.

'Sit down and I'll fix you an ice pack,' he directed.

'I can fix my own ice pack,' she replied.

Throwing her an exasperated glance, he left the kitchen, returning with two glasses of brandy. 'Drink this,' he said.

'I'm not much of a drinker,' she protested.

'It will help settle your nerves,' he persisted, taking her arm and leading her to the table.

'My nerves are just fine,' she argued weakly. 'All I need is a little sleep.'

He seated her in one of the chairs. 'I need you to rebandage my wrist,' he pointed out.

His nearness made her tense and she took a sip of the brandy. 'Did the salt water hurt your stitches?' she asked.

'No,' he murmured. 'Does your eye hurt much?'

'A little,' she admitted, finishing the brandy. 'You could kiss it and make it better like my grandmother used to do,' she suggested. Then, shocked by her words, she said, 'I didn't mean that.'

Pushing his chair back, Brad walked over to the cabinet and extracted a bottle of aspirin. Taking out two, he ran a glass of water, then

carried the pills and water to the table. 'Take these,' he directed, and she did. 'And now it's time for you to be in bed.'

'I agree.' Nodding to emphasise her words, she was suddenly caught in a wave of dizziness.

'I've never seen one glass of brandy go to a person's head so fast,' Brad muttered.

'One glass of brandy and three glasses of champagne,' she corrected. 'I told you I wasn't much of a drinker.'

'And you were right. I'll have to remember that in future.'

'We don't have a future,' she mused. 'You and Monica do. You're going to marry her and spite Hanna by having little half-Yankees running around Cyprus Point.'

'You shouldn't listen to gossip. Monica and I are just good friends,' he said. 'Now stand up and go to bed.'

'You're not going to marry her?' she said hopefully.

'No. Now stand up,' he demanded sharply.

'I'm not sure I can,' she confessed.

'After tonight I can see why Steve is so protective of you,' he grumbled, helping her up.

'I resent that!' She glared.

'I know you do.' He sighed, then wrapping his good arm around the tops of her legs, he hoisted her on to his shoulder for the short trip into her bedroom.

'Now go to sleep!' he barked, and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

*

SARA awoke next morning with a splitting headache to the sound of male voices arguing in the kitchen.

'I thought I'd made it clear that I didn't want anyone following me!' Brad's angry tones were distinct.

'After the accident I felt it was necessary. You could have been set up,' Steve pointed out. 'But about last night...'

'What about last night?' Brad interrupted. 'If your man has eyes he knows I didn't knock your sister into the water. I was the one who dived in after her.'

'What the hell was she doing out with Fallon in the first place? Everyone knows the man's a drunkard.'

'And how was I to stop her? Lock her in her room? I'm in a restricted position!'

'You could have called me! Now, whether she likes it or not, I'm taking her home with me until she finds a place of her own,' Steve said with finality.

'Yes, that would be for the best.' Brad's voice was hard.

The ringing of the phone interrupted any further exchange. She heard Brad answer it and say, 'Sara will be fine except for a black eye.' There was a pause, then, 'If you feel that strongly, of course I'll come.' As the receiver clicked into place, he addressed Steve. 'That was Monica. She wants me to meet her at the yacht club, and I don't want one of your men following me. Is that understood?'

'You're the boss,' Steve conceded.

'Try to keep that in mind in the future,' Brad growled as he slammed out of the room.

Sara rose slowly, her head pounding, and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt.

'Sara, you look dreadful!' Steve greeted her.

'Could you whisper?' she requested.

Leading her over to a chair, he found two aspirin and, after getting her to swallow them, poured her a cup of coffee. 'About last night...'

'I refuse to discuss last night,' she interrupted.

'I can't believe you let yourself drink too much. Especially when you were out with a lush,' he reprimanded.

'I didn't. Your boss gave me a brandy when we got home. On top of the champagne, that did it,' she muttered.

'He didn't take advantage of you, did he?' Steve demanded.

'I asked you to keep your voice down—and no, he didn't. He's not interested in me.' The chimes from the front door bell suddenly split the air.

Shaking his head, Steve left to answer the summons. Marc Fallon burst into the kitchen with Steve close behind.

'Sara, I'm so sorry,' he apologised. 'I'm afraid jealousy brings out the worst in me.'

'Apology accepted, provided you keep your voice down,' she bargained.

'I didn't know salt water could cause a hangover.' He frowned.

'Brad gave her a brandy after they returned home,' Steve explained.

'He didn't take advantage of you, did he?' Marc asked.

'No, he didn't,' she snapped back, wondering if that was all the male population thought about.

'I think you should go back to bed,' Marc advised.

'No...something is wrong.' Sara shook her head trying to clear the fog.

'Are you sick?' Steve was immediately by her side.

'No, it's not that, but I have a feeling something terrible is going to happen—I know it. Something to do with Brad.'

'He's at the yacht club with Monica.' Steve frowned. 'What could happen there?'

'I don't know, but Monica could be in danger, too.' Sara looked up at Marc.

'I never question a woman's intuition.' He smiled. 'Come on, I'll drive you out there.'

'I'll just tag along behind,' said Steve.

By the time they reached their destination, her head was clear and she focused on her instinctive knowledge of impending danger.

As she and Marc walked into the clubhouse, Steve joined them.

'Have you seen my sister?' Marc demanded at reception.

'She and Mr. Garwood went down to the yacht a few minutes ago,' the clerk replied.

Immediately Sara was on her way

out the door and down to the pier, with the men close behind.

'Hey, Bobbie, retie those lines,' Marc called out to a young man ahead of them.

'But your sister wants to take *Wandering Lady* out.'

'Tie her back up,' Marc ordered. 'I want to check her.'

'Marc, what are you doing here with Miss Manderly?' Monica demanded from the deck above them.

'Permission to come aboard, skipper,' Marc called up.

'What is this all about?' Monica frowned as the three completed boarding.

'I apologise for the intrusion,' Marc said, smiling, 'but Sara's into premonitions, and she seems to think that you and Brad are in some kind of danger.'

'Speaking of Brad, where is he?' Steve asked.

'First of all, who are you?' Monica frowned.

'I'm Steve Manderly, Sara's brother. And I work for Brad Garwood. The desk clerk said he was here with you, but I don't see him.'

'The man was exhausted,' Monica explained. 'I persuaded him to take the day off and go fishing with me. He's in one of the cabins napping right now.'

Before Monica could protest, Sara was past her and on her way below deck to the cabins. In the second one she found Brad stretched out on the double bed. He appeared to be sleeping peacefully, but she shook his arm gently. When his eyes didn't

open, she shook him again, harder. 'Please, wake up,' she stammered.

'Sara, what's wrong?' Steve demanded, joining her.

'I can't wake him,' she choked out.

Steve frowned, placing his hand over the pulse in Brad's neck. 'His heartbeat is slow but strong and his breathing is regular.' Raising an eyelid, he looked at the pupil. 'I'd say he was drugged.'

'I've checked the engine and there's nothing wrong with it.' Marc's voice sounded from the passageway. A moment later he entered the cabin and demanded, 'What's going on?'

'We can't wake him,' she said, fighting back the tears. 'You'd better call an ambulance.'

'That won't be necessary,' Monica announced calmly from the doorway. 'He'll wake up in a couple of hours or maybe a little longer. I had to compensate for his size, and might have made the dose a little heavy. I don't plan for him to die from an overdose.'

'You...' Sara turned to face the woman, and saw the gun in her hand.

'Yes, Miss Manderly, me.' Monica's expression was ice. 'You and your brother are much too nosy for your own good.'

'Monica, what's got into you?' Marc demanded.

'Sorry, baby brother. I didn't want to get you mixed up in this,' she said. 'But I have to take care of Brad today. Hanna will never forgive me if I let him sign those pa-

pers. Can you imagine a Yankee owning Cyprus Point? Of course, I would have preferred to marry him first and get the property out of Daddy's hands, but apparently, he isn't the marrying kind.'

'You aren't making any sense.' Marc tried to reason with her.

'Yes, I am, and you know it.' Her voice was chillingly calm. 'When old Mrs. Collins died just before signing, it was obvious Hanna never intended letting the property out of her hands. Of course, Martin Sayford was a different problem.' Her mouth was petulant. 'I waited for Hanna to do something about him. But the week before the papers were to be signed, she still hadn't acted, so I realised that she was counting on me.'

'It wasn't so difficult, either.' A wild gleam sparked in Monica's eyes. 'The man was a drunken bore. He agreed to meet me in the mountains for what he thought would be a very enjoyable weekend—but I got him drunk and challenged him to a race. He was so sloshed he could barely get into his car, much less negotiate those mountain roads.'

'Give me the gun,' Marc directed.

'I can't do that. I'll need it to convince these people to abandon ship after we're out in the ocean.'

'You can't be serious,' he admonished.

'I think she's dead serious,' Steve observed darkly.

'You, Mr. Manderly, are a very perceptive man.' She smiled. Then to her brother she said, 'Since I

don't think I can trust you to cooperate, you'll have to stay locked up here with the others until we're out of the harbour. But you're a Hallows and I know you'll stand by me when the time comes.'

'We are not leaving this harbour.' Marc moved slowly towards her. 'You're going to see a doctor. You need help.'

'Careful, Fallon,' Steve cautioned.

'She won't harm me, will you, Monica?' Marc said.

'I don't want to,' she admitted. 'But I can't fail Hanna.'

'Hanna is dead. Now give me the gun.'

'You'd better not say things like that. Hanna will never forgive me if I don't save Cyprus Point from outsiders.'

'Hanna is dead! She can neither forgive nor not forgive,' Marc stated. 'Besides, after you left this morning, Dad told me that if anything happened to stop the sale this time, he was going to turn it over to one of the historical foundations.'

'No, he can't!' Monica shrieked.

'He can and he will,' Marc assured her.

'Hanna's going to be so angry,' she muttered. 'Will you protect me from her?'

'I promise I'll protect you,' he said.

The gun dropped to the floor as she dissolved into tears.

While Marc soothed the sobbing woman, Steve retrieved the gun and slipped out of the cabin to call the police and an ambulance. Sinking

onto the edge of the bed, Sara picked up one of Brad's hands and sat holding it tightly.

The sounds of several pairs of feet could soon be heard above them, and Monica's attention shifted to the new arrivals. 'It seems as if we have several guests topside,' she said. 'I'd better see to them.'

Marc led her away while Sara sat with Brad.

The paramedics arrived to examine him. 'He'll be fine,' the older of the two men assured her as they transferred his still-unconscious form to a stretcher. 'His heartbeat is strong and his blood pressure is good. Don't you worry.'

Sara's 'premonition of disaster' story earned her a few guarded glances, but Monica's behaviour got the most attention. Between bouts of offering everyone drinks, she calmly explained to the police about the necessity of keeping her family home. She told of manipulating Martin Sayford and arranging accidents for Brad as if these were rational everyday activities like pulling weeds.

Taking Sara aside, Marc apologised for her.

'It isn't your fault she's sick,' said Sara, adding, 'we all owe you our lives.'

'I have to believe that she wouldn't really have murdered all of you.' He shook his head. 'I only hope the doctors can help her bury Hanna once and for all.'

'I hope so, too,' Sara soothed.

Standing in the parking lot, watching the police drive away with Marc and Monica, Steve offered to

drop Sara off at his house, but she insisted on going to the hospital with him. She had to be certain Brad was really all right.

At the hospital the doctor reassured them. 'He had a pretty large dose, but he's fighting the drug. He's been drifting in and out of consciousness.'

'Can we see him?' Steve questioned.

'For a moment,' the man agreed.

'What happened?' Brad questioned, opening his eyes to discover Steve. 'They won't tell me anything in here. The last thing I remember is drinking a cup of coffee on the yacht and then feeling so dizzy I had to lie down.'

'That coffee contained quite a wallop,' said Steve.

'Wallop?' Brad muttered.

'You were drugged,' Sara clarified softly.

'Monica turned out to be a little unbalanced. She was planning to deep-six you to save the family estate,' Steve explained. 'She was also the woman who called you the night of the accident and drove the truck that pulled out in front of you. She'd even rigged the railing on the balcony the night of the ball.'

'That was a pretty risky way to stage an accident,' Brad muttered. 'In fact, both of them were.'

'That's what made her so difficult to spot. She was willing to take risks,' Steve frowned.

'How did you know I was in trouble?' Brad asked.

'Sara had a premonition,' Steve glanced at her. 'I'll bet you never

guessed she was psychic on top of all her other abilities.'

'Nothing about Sara would surprise me,' Brad murmured, drifting back into unconsciousness.

Swallowing hard, Sara caught Steve's arm. 'I think we should be leaving,' she said. Brad's words had stung, reminding her of what a fool she had been where he was concerned. She could not face him again.

'Why don't you throw a few things into your suitcases and finish packing tomorrow?' Steve suggested as he drove her back to Brad's house. 'You look tired.'

'I'm fine,' she refused. 'They'll be keeping Brad in the hospital tonight and part of tomorrow, so I'll use this opportunity to pack and move out.'

'Mom's arriving home soon. You're not going to stay around to nurse him for a few more days, are you?' he asked.

'No,' she assured him tightly.

Alone inside the house, she wandered from room to room as if saying goodbye to a much-loved, long-occupied dwelling. It was a muddle as she threw things into boxes and suitcases, but after two hours she had moved all her personal things out of the bedroom and bath.

Cramming the last box into her car, she realised that she was too tired to trust herself to drive to Steve's. Besides, she wanted one last night in this house. Too tense to lie down, she climbed the stairs to her studio.

The clay bust stood on its stand

in the centre of the room. Unwrapping it, she ran her fingers over the roughly defined features, refusing to allow herself the luxury of tears. Brad was going to live; only that was important.

Somehow she had to free herself from the bond she felt toward him. Maybe distance was the answer. She would go to Paris. All painters should go to Paris at least once. She had enough to live on for quite a while. She might even find a job teaching English.

A small voice within her warned that distance would do no good, but still she was determined to try.

She noticed a lone painting leaning against one wall. Without question, she knew it was the one Brad had set aside for himself and, carrying it into his workroom, she placed it on his drawing board. 'It's a gift,' she told the emptiness around her. 'Something to remember me by.'

Back in her studio, she stared at the clay head. She knew now that she could never finish it.

Exhaustion overwhelmed her and, curling up on the couch, she fell into a fitful sleep.

It was dark when she awoke. Turning onto her back, she saw the moon and stars shining through the skylight. 'A night for lovers,' she murmured. Life was so unfair!

The sound of footsteps on the stairs brought her abruptly into a sitting position and, glancing at the luminous dial on her watch, she saw that it was a little after eleven. A spasm of fear shook her. Not of the

man approaching, but of herself and how she would face him.

His form blocked the doorway and he stared into the moonlit room. There was a click and the room was flooded with light.

'Sara.' Brad growled her name. 'Your room downstairs was empty. I assumed you'd be at Steve's house.'

'I was too tired to drive,' she said tightly. 'I didn't expect you to come home tonight.'

'I checked myself out of the hospital. I've slept off the drug.'

Awkwardly, she rose. 'I should be going now.' She meant her voice to sound calm, but the tone was terse. 'I'll finish picking up my things tomorrow while you're out signing the papers on Cyprus Point.'

'I won't be signing those papers,' he said curtly. 'I've talked to David Fallon and he's agreed to let me out of the agreement.'

'I'm sorry about Monica,' she managed.

'Me, too. I thought she was a friend. I knew she was upset about her father selling the family estate, but I thought I could convince her that I would care for it.'

'And that was why you were seeing her?'

Some of the tautness left his stance. 'Yes. That...and to keep an eye on you. When I couldn't stop you going out with Fallon, I arranged to be around in case you needed help.' His gaze fell on her eyes. 'Obviously my caution was well-founded.'

'Marc saved your life...our lives,' she said.

'Does that mean he's now your hero?' Brad demanded.

'No, I was only trying to be fair.' She sighed. 'Please, I don't want us to part in anger.'

'No,' he agreed, his manner softening.

'Now I really must be going.' She started resolutely towards the door, but still he did not move.

'Damn it, Sara! You're not going anywhere.' Brad caught her by the arm. 'At least not until I've had a chance to talk to you. I'm not going to lose you. Not without a fight,' he growled.

The desperation in his voice caused her to look up into his face. 'I d-don't understand,' she stammered.

'I promised your brother that as long as you were under my roof I would not make any advances toward you, and I've tried to keep that promise. But now...'

'You promised Steve what?' she interjected.

'He had a right to ask—he's your brother. And at the time, I was so angry with you, I felt certain I would have no trouble keeping my word.'

'I've never believed in love at first sight,' he continued, tightening his hold. 'I've always thought that two people had to take time to know one another before a long-lasting bond could be established. I refused to consider the possibility that I was already in love with you even after you entered this house and it sud-

denly felt like a home. Then there was that first morning when you came out of your room with your hair all mussed...'

'You growled at me,' she accused, 'and made me feel like an ugly duckling.'

'Only because you looked so inviting I could barely stop myself from taking you into my arms and wishing you a very improper good morning.' He kissed the bridge of her nose. 'And I was locked into that promise I'd made to Steve. I never wanted to be rid of you. I only wanted you out of my home so that I could court you.' He looked hard into her face. 'I love you. I feel as if you're a part of me that's been missing all these years.' Feathering kisses over her face, he captured her lips for a kiss that spoke of an insatiable hunger. Straining against him, she let her body tell him of her own need.

Deserting her mouth, he nibbled along the cord of her neck, causing goosebumps. When she responded with a low moan of pleasure he asked huskily, 'Can I assume that if I were to ask you to marry me, you wouldn't tell me that I'm being ridiculous?'

'That's a reasonable assumption,' she replied, kissing the hollow of his neck.

'Woman, I wonder if you have any idea what you do to me.' He laughed.

'I think I do.' She smiled shyly.

'And I think I should drive you to your brother's house right now,' he said.

'Should you be left alone to-night?' she questioned. 'Don't you think someone should be here to keep a close watch over you?'

'How close?' His hands moved possessively over her hips.

'Very close,' she breathed. 'I don't think I mentioned it before, but I only have premonitions about people I love.'

SNUGGLED against Brad's body, Sara awoke the next morning to a peace she had never known.

'Good morning, sleepyhead,' he greeted her.

'Good morning,' she returned.

Catching her chin, he gently lifted her face to meet his gaze. 'I hope you realise that you've compromised me completely,' he growled. 'So you'll have to marry me immediately.'

'Speaking of immediately,' she said, 'what time is it?'

'I've just proposed and the lady wants to know the time!'

'I'm serious.' Sara leaned over to read the clock, and gasped.

'What's the rush? You haven't given me your answer. Will you marry me immediately?'

'Yes—just let me get dressed. It's after nine and Steve could show up here at any minute.'

'No, he won't,' said Brad, trailing a line of kisses along her shoulder.

'I called him while you were still asleep.'

'You did what?' she demanded.

'I called and told him we were getting married and that I would not appreciate his barging in while we were discussing our wedding plans.' He left her shoulder to tease a breast.

'What did he s-say?' she stammered.

'He said that once he knew about the premonitions, he realised that this was inevitable. However, he thought we should do more about a wedding than discuss it, so how does tomorrow suit you?'

'That's not much time,' she murmured.

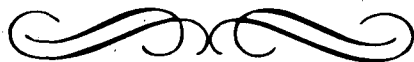
Straightening away from her, he met her gaze. 'I want you with me always, Sara,' he growled, running his hand along the length of her body. 'And I don't want to have to worry about an irate brother or mother breaking down my door. Then there's the matter of the little half-Yankees I want to have running around underfoot.'

'Tomorrow,' she agreed, trembling as his touch reawakened desire.

'Good.' He smiled. 'Now it's time to take a little trip to the licence bureau.'

'Right this minute?' She was running a hand over his chest.

'No, not right this minute,' he conceded huskily.



*A Personal Moment
With Author
Anne McAllister*



*A*nne McAllister was born and raised in California—land of surfers, swimmers and beach-volleyball players. She spent her teenage years researching them in hopes of finding the perfect hero. It turned out, however, that a few summer weeks at her grandparents' home in Colorado were formative. She was fixated on dark, handsome, intense lone-wolf types. Over thirty years ago she found the perfect one prowling the stacks of books in the university library and married him. They now have four children, three dogs, a fat cat and live in the Midwest in a reasonable facsimile of semiperfect wedded bliss.

*B*ut even though she's been married to the man of her dreams for over thirty years, she still likes writing about those men of the West! *The Cowboy Crashes a Wedding* marks the eighth installment of Anne McAllister's popular Western series, *Code of the West*. Be sure to look for this novel in July 1998 wherever *Silhouette Desire* novels are sold. RITA Award-winning author Anne McAllister also writes for *Harlequin Presents* and *Harlequin American Romance*.



PMAM

STAR SIGNS—MAY & JUNE



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

Recent frustrations will start to fade and although you may lack energy, you'll be feeling brighter. A friend brings out the best in you with a surprise outing.



CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

By trying to see a situation through others' eyes, you will prevent a lot of arguments. By taking a stubborn attitude you will make matters worse. A win midmonth gives cause for celebration.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

Try to stop feeling responsible for the way events have gone and you will realize that problems need solving not indulging. Put your energies into working things through and there will be personal satisfaction.



PISCES February 23-March 22

As the weeks go by you may find it hard to relax or feel comfortable within a relationship. You can be strong so allow your true feelings to rule your head—the outcome could be surprising.



ARIES March 23-April 22

A peaceful period in which there should be time to really relax. An excellent time to start a new project either at work or in the home.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

Everyone seems to be making demands on your time so you will have to decide what is really important for you and ignore the rest. News of a pregnancy or birth late in the month may mean a celebration.

STAR SIGNS (continued)

**GEMINI May 23-June 21**

Someone close needs your support and although career matters are keeping you busy, try to find the time to help. Important documents need careful attention so don't skip the small print.

**CANCER June 22-July 22**

Recent successes are keeping your spirits high and you will continue to make good progress both with career matters and in your personal life. Red is lucky for a night out.

**LEO July 23-August 22**

A visitor is going to surprise you in an unexpected way and bring a smile to your face. Career moves are also well aspected and progress can be made in many areas of your life.

**VIRGO August 23-September 22**

This is a very social time when you will be much in demand. A letter brings news that may lead to a trip away. A friend helps out but don't forget to appreciate her actions.

**LIBRA September 23-October 22**

An enjoyable month with life generally moving in your direction. Family matters that have led to tensions finally get resolved. A bargain buy late in the month brings great pleasure.

**SCORPIO October 23-November 22**

You will be feeling more positive as life starts to go your way; however, don't rush all your plans into action at once. By taking your time and thinking things through, the rewards will be great.

Coming in future issues:

Midnight Rider ♥ *Cait London*

Hannah Ferguson Jordan and Daniel Josiah Blaylock would always have their differences. Both were strong personalities and very much their own people. But they shared a passion—for the land and for each other—that could not be denied.

Journey of Desire ♥ *Laurie Paige*

Sarah Lynn Abbot had fled her high-security job in Washington, D.C., for a cruise holiday in the Greek Islands. Then a handsome stranger invaded her vacation hideaway. Tender, provocative Mark Terrington seemed bent on learning her secrets. Why did he take her in his arms and devour her with hungry kisses? Had she fallen for the man of her dreams or a dangerous enemy who was after her mind, not her heart?

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READER'S CORNER CROSSWORD #42

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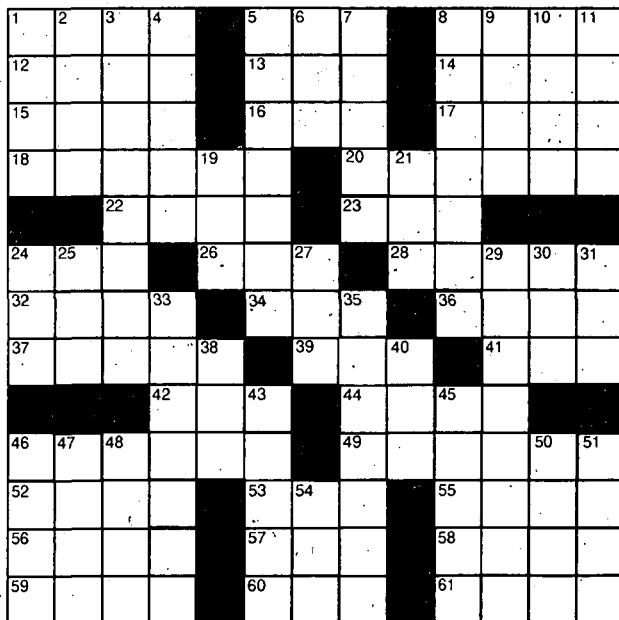
1. Subsides
5. Engine part
8. Give out
12. Chestnut-colored
13. "___ Fine Day"
14. Malevolent
15. Atmosphere
16. Commercials
17. Onion's kin
18. Retail outlets
20. Changes
22. Uncluttered
23. Model
24. Sock part
26. Comedian Buttons
28. Lure
32. "Star in the ___"
34. Strike
36. Facet
37. Malicious burning
39. Traveler's guide
41. Profit
42. Feel unwell
44. Sunup
46. Struggle
49. Fears
52. Legal order
53. Hole-making tool
55. Give off
56. Monster in fairy tales
57. Fixed charge
58. Symbol of peace
59. Source
60. O.K.
61. Cinch

DOWN

1. Epochs
2. Match for Holyfield
3. Female noble
4. Capture
5. Table protector
6. Conjunction
7. Western plateaus
8. Takes out
9. Heated chamber
10. Told an untruth
11. Lodge members
19. Cup handle
21. At the central point of
24. Brewed drink
25. Paddle
27. Water barrier
29. Baking spice
30. Poem of praise
31. Nonetheless
33. Saluted
35. Propels a canoe
38. Zip
40. Duffer's goal
43. Covered with foliage

45. Garden pests
46. Pairs
47. Yearning
48. Horse's father
50. Prima donna
51. Part of a process
54. Tiny

Solution on page 64 of this issue.

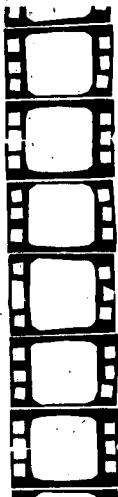


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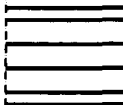
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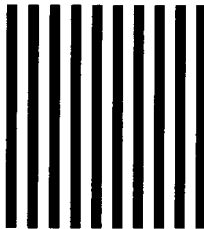


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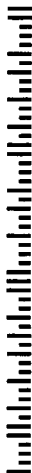


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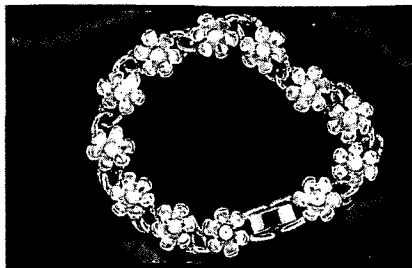
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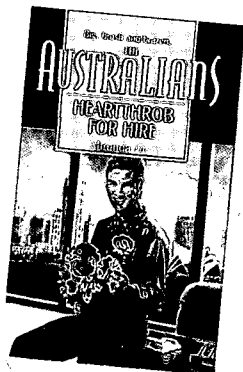
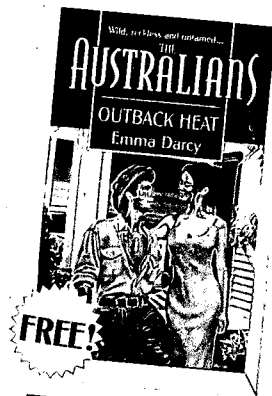
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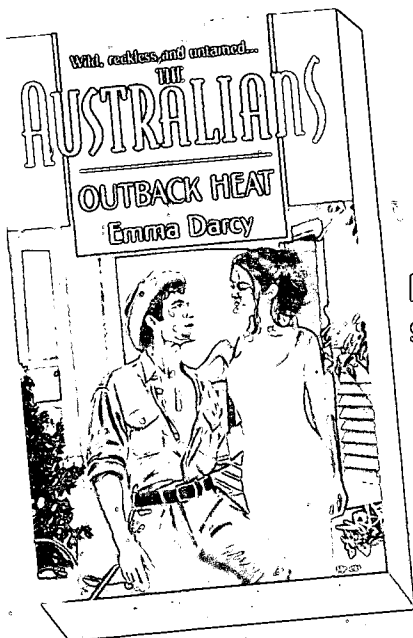
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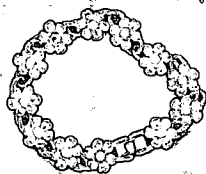
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